ICCR LIBRARY
E12496

INDIAN COUNCIL
FOR
CULTURAL RELATIONS
NEW DELHI

Accession No. E 12496
Call No. 891.23 AIY

V-07

891.23/AYE
12496
V.A.K.
€ King

DUE DATE

This book should be returned to the Library on or before the date last stamped below.

21-8-2015

V-10

आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतः।

Let noble thoughts come to us from every side

— Rigveda, 1-89-i

BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

General Editors
K. M. MUNSHI
R. R. DIWAKAR

102

STORIES OF
KING MADANA KAMA

Retold by

V. A. K. AYER

BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

Organising Committee :

Lilavati Munshi — *Chairman*
K. K. Birla
S. G. Nevatia
J. H. Dave
S. Ramakrishnan

BHAVAN'S BOOK UNIVERSITY

STORIES OF
KING MADANA KAMA

Retold by
V. A. K. AYER

ICCR LIBRARY
E12496

INDIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS
NEW DELHI

1962
BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN
CHAUPATTY, BOMBAY

Copyright and rights of translation and reproduction reserved by the Publishers

First Edition, December 1962

V-96

891.23
A1Y

2/50

Price Rs. 2/-, Sh. 3/6 or $ 0.90
Rupee Price (Outside India) Rs. 2.25

12496

PRINTED IN INDIA
By M. R. Sirur at Sirur Printing Press, Khetwadi 12th Lane,
Bombay 4, and published by S. Ramakrishnan, Executive Secretary,
Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay 7.

GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan—that Institute of Indian Culture in Bombay—needed a Book University, a series of books which, if read, would serve the purpose of providing higher education. Particular emphasis, however, was to be put on such literature as revealed the deeper impulsions of India. As a first step, it was decided to bring out in English 100 books, 50 of which were to be taken in hand almost at once. Each book was to contain from 200 to 250 pages and was to be priced at Rs. 2/-.

It is our intention to publish the books we select, not only in English, but also in the following Indian languages: Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

This scheme, involving the publication of 900 volumes, requires ample funds and an all-India organisation. The Bhavan is exerting its utmost to supply them.

The objectives for which the Bhavan stands are the reintegration of the Indian culture in the light of modern knowledge and to suit our present-day needs and the resuscitation of its fundamental values in their pristine vigour.

Let me make our goal more explicit:

We seek the dignity of man, which necessarily implies the creation of social conditions which would allow him freedom to evolve along the lines of his own temperament and capacities; we seek the harmony of individual efforts and social relations, not in any makeshift way, but within the frame-work of the Moral Order; we seek the creative art of life, by the alchemy of which human limitations are progressively transmuted, so that man may become the instrument of God, and is able to see Him in all and all in Him.

The world, we feel, is too much with us. Nothing would uplift or inspire us so much as the beauty and aspiration which such books can teach.

In this series, therefore, the literature of India, ancient and modern, will be published in a form easily accessible to all. Books in other literatures of the world, if they illustrate the principles we stand for, will also be included.

This common pool of literature, it is hoped, will enable the reader, eastern or western, to understand and appreciate currents of world thought, as also the movements of the mind in India, which, though they flow through different linguistic channels, have a common urge and aspiration.

Fittingly, the Book University's first venture is the *Mahabharata,* summarised by one of the greatest living Indians, C. Rajagopalachari; the second work is on a section of it, the *Gita* by H. V. Divatia, an eminent jurist and a student of philosophy. Centuries ago, it was proclaimed of the *Mahabharata:* "What is not in it, is nowhere." After twenty-five centuries, we can use the same words about it. He who knows it not, knows not the heights and depths of the soul; he misses the trials and tragedy and the beauty and grandeur of life.

The *Mahabharata* is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems that is hard to rival; but, above all, it has for its core the *Gita,* which is, as the world is beginning to find out, the noblest of scriptures and the grandest of sagas in which the climax is reached in the wondrous Apocalypse in the Eleventh Canto.

Through such books alone the harmonies underlying true culture, I am convinced, will one day reconcile the disorders of modern life.

I thank all those who have helped to make this new branch of the Bhavan's activity successful.

1, Queen Victoria Road,
New Delhi.
3rd October 1951.

K. M. MUNSHI

१०

FOREWORD

TILL at least a generation ago these stories ruled the homes in Tamil Nad. They became the equipment nonpareil of the grandmother whose duty it was to put the young ones to bed or to engage the adolescent for an idle hour or keep them from boredom.

Handed down mostly by word of mouth from mother to the children for generations now, they have assumed a status next only to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

As lay stories they recapture for us the wit, wisdom and wile on the one side and the adventurous spirit on the other, of Indian society in the bygone days which the bards have evidently invested with the glamour we are so fond of visualising on the celluloid screen. Indeed these very stories, at any rate in our country, have formed the basic material of the celluloid.

The authorship of these stories is traditionally ascribed to the Tamil poet Pugazhendi who is said to have lived in the twelfth century. His most famous work, however, is the *Nalavenba* or the poetic rendering of Nala's story from *Mahabharata*. Having regard to this fact, Poet Pugazhendi—it may well be his title inasmuch as the word Pugazhendi means the 'much praised'—possibly borrowed, some at least, of the themes of *Madana Kama* from the then prevalent Sanskrit sources and wove them into a fine yarn. But that is immaterial, for, our civilization is one and indivisible.

Possibly this is the first English version of these famous stories and my object in retelling them is only to make them known to other parts of the country, and to the outside world. In doing so, I have taken small liberties with the original, sometimes in the names of characters, very slightly in situations, for reasons of presentability.

I shall consider my efforts fully rewarded if the reader is able to steal a few hours of delight reading them.

Bombay: V. A. K. AYER
Nov. 21, 1962

CONTENTS

PAGE
General Editor's Preface v
Foreword ix
1. Injured Innocence 1
2. The Prince Escapes 5
3. Women of the Portrait 12
4. Chaturya Discovers the Girls 20
5. Lord Shankara to the Rescue 28
6. Chaturya "Marries" 33
7. The First Night 41
8. The Guru's Chance 50
9. The Chela Gives the Slip 55
10. Parrot and the Princess 60
11. The Happy Truce 66
12. Prince who Brought a Cat 71
13. The Beggar Prince Becomes a Monarch ... 77
14. The Magic Ring Passes Hands 85
15. Magic Ring Recovered 91
16. The Tortoise-Prince 96
17. The Tortoise-Prince Weds 103
18. Ingratitude 108
19. The Tortoise-Prince Comes Back to Life 113
20. In Quest of the Divine Lotus 119
21. Jagatala-Pratapa 130
22. The Nag Kanya 139
23. Varuna's Daughter 147
24. Pratapa Teaches a Lesson 152
25. Pratapa in a Soup 159

26. PRATAPA MAKES A SECOND BID 164
27. PRATAPA REGAINS HIS KINGDOM 170
28. THE DIVINE MANGO 176
29, THE YOUNGER PRINCE AT LARGE 182
30. DANSEUSE BECOMES A BABOON 187
31. THE REUNION 193
32. IN QUEST OF PARIJATA 197
33. THE PRINCE'S ROMANCE 201
34. THE PRINCE UNCOVERED 206
35. THE TORTOISE PRINCE UNRAVELS 211
36. THE INTREPID GAMBLER 216
37. RAMBHA'S CURSE 222
38. THE GAMBLER 'CURES' THE PRINCESS ... 227
39. FORGERY IN YAMA-LOKA 230
40. RELENTLESS FATE 235
41. LAKSHMI REJOINS HER HUSBAND 242
42. THE LOVE-POTION 247
43. LAKSHMI REUNITED 252
44. AMRITAVALLI 256
45. MAN PROPOSES, BUT 261
46. THE DOUBLE-CROSS 265
47. AMRITAVALLI MARRIES 269
48. IN SEARCH OF LORD SIVA 275
49. VIRTUES OF ANNA-DANA 280
50. THE OILMAN'S DAUGHTER 284
51. WEDDING BELLS 292

1. INJURED INNOCENCE

"LOOK, Chaturya! I shall pierce the water-pot on the head of that tall girl with a stone from my catapult. You must plug the hole immediately by shooting a wet clay-ball from your catapult. In doing so, not a particle of water should escape. What do you say?"

'Yes, Prince! I am game," replied Chaturya.

No sooner did the conversation end than the feat was accomplished and the girl did not have the ghost of a suspicion that her pitcher was thus being tampered with, while the two youngsters laughed in self-admiration.

The two youngsters who enjoyed this practical joke were none other than Prince Madana Kama of Mahendrapuri and his bosom friend Buddhi Chaturya, the Minister's son.

King Mahendra who was well-versed in the four Vedas, six *sastras,* the sixty-four arts, *Manu* and other Dharma sastras, ruled over Mahendrapuri in a manner that was the envy of gods. He loved his subjects as his own life. In his Minister who was vastly more learned, the King had Brihaspati (preceptor of gods) himself.

For a long time the King as well as his Minister had no children. As a result of propitiating God in all possible ways, as ordained in the *sastras* like renovation of temples, sacrifices, pilgrimages and the thirty-two kinds of *danas* (gifts), they were blessed with a son each. The King named his son Madana Kama for his extraordinary beauty and the Minister named his son Buddhi Chaturya for his intelligent look.

It is needless to say that the parents brought these two children up not merely with the greatest affection but put them under the tutelage of the foremost instructor of the country, the Raja-Guru, who gave them top education in all the subjects needed for a monarch.

The boys too grew up in proportion to the care bestowed on them. In time they were given the sacred thread and married to excellent girls.

The boys took to each other very fondly, Chaturya always remembering that the Prince was, in addition, his Master. Always they went out together and it was in one of those sprees that the two youngsters accomplished the feat described in the beginning.

It was forenoon. It was the custom for the two to indulge in play in the river-bank at Mahendrapuri where the women came for bathing and drawing water. When it was time for lunch, they would repair to the palace.

On that day Chaturya addressed his friend: "Prince, I feel very hungry today, let us return to the palace."

"Why, it is not even nine in the morning! Has the rat entered your stomach?" asked the Prince as he laughed. "It won't kill you if you starve for some time."

"Excuse me, Prince, I must go home."

"Do then, if you must; I shall stay back till you return."

"But then, I hope, you won't harm yourself by being alone?"

"I shall take care of myself; don't you worry!"

And Chaturya left the Prince. As he proceeded, however, he could not help looking back at his friend with some apprehension; for, he was never given to leaving the Prince alone and subconsciously believed himself to be the Prince's bodyguard. He, therefore, decided to finish his lunch quickly and return to his friend's side while the Prince was amusing himself on the embankment.

The Raja-Guru, under whom the two youngsters studied, had a daughter who was in the prime of her youth. Infatuated by the Prince's beauty, she had long been looking for an opportunity of meeting him privately but the minister's son, Chaturya, who was always with the Prince like his shadow, stood in her way.

On this particular day, however, she got the news that the Prince was alone in the river-bank. She, therefore, quickly spread the materials for her father's *puja,* lest he should call her, and doing herself up attractively went in the direction of the river with a pitcher poised on her hip.

Leaving the pitcher on the bank, she searched out the Prince who was lazing at a sequestered spot. As he did not notice her coming, she touched him on the shoulder and asked coquettishly; "How is it, Prince, you are alone today? Has your friend deserted you—or has there been a quarrel?"

"Nothing of the kind. He said he was feeling hungry and has gone to the palace to take his lunch. I am waiting for his return," replied the Prince.

"How is it then, Prince, while you are so understanding in dealing with your friend, you fail to show similar consideration to your Guru's daughter?" asked she.

"I don't think I am so callous as that. I am not aware that you need anything!"

"O, these men! They never understand a woman," and saying that, she sat down in a charming pose beside the Prince and throwing herself on his lap, pulled his face towards her.

The Prince was stunned by the totally unexpected behaviour and a sense of revulsion as that of touching a reptile pervaded his frame as he stood up shaking her off.

Cooling himself he addressed her: "Madam, you are the daughter of my learned Guru and as such, you should not behave like an unlettered wench. Don't you know Manu's definition that a Guru is one's own father? Are you not my sister then? Please desist from this madness!"

"But does not that same Manu ask you to accept a woman who, overcome by passion, offers herself voluntarily to you?"

"Not in the case of my sister that I have fully taken you to be and shall maintain such relations at all costs and events. Please be sensible and return home."

Infuriated like an injured tiger, the Guru's daughter gnashed her teeth and said in a leer: "Prince, I thought you were clever, but now I see that you are a dolt. Since you have rejected my overtures, I shall see that your head rolls on the earth within an hour and a half!"

So saying, she let loose her hair, re-did her sari incriminatingly and knocking her knuckles broke the bangles with whose pieces she scratched herself all over and howling loudly ran home.

2. THE PRINCE ESCAPES

A WOMAN'S hate is more fearful than the viper's venom. While the latter endangers the life of the hated, the former harms his reputation which, in terms of his future life, does him incalculable harm. And when the hated happens to occupy an exalted position, the harm is correspondingly greater; at any rate it was so in olden days.

When the Guruji's daughter left the Prince in a fury she had only one thought in her mind, and that was to kill the man who had so heartlessly rebuffed her overtures. Had she the power of a rishi, she would doubtless have burnt him to ashes on the spot like the *vatu* of *Mahabharata* fame, who burnt a bird by his look. Psychologists sometimes explain the change of love into hate as a defensive process and therefore negative in content. But in her case, it was a positive instinct which accounted for her determination to see the Prince through, despite the fact of his being the lord of the land. Indeed she never reckoned him as anything except an earth-worm to be trampled upon.

From the cloud of incense steaming out of the ventilators of the Raja-Guru Sadan, one could see that the venerable man had not yet finished his *puja*. For a moment the daughter of the house stood before the closed door, did a semicircle, and biting her lips and holding the skirts in her hands, jerked her head in defiance at the Prince at the far distance. Turning back she kicked the door which flung ajar. Before the Raja-Guru could lift up his face at this noise, she had flung herself with a thud at his feet to which she clung whimpering.

The startled father held her face in both his hands and asked tremulously: "My dear, tell me what happened to you. Please tell."

It is strange how the affinity between a parent and his child automatically strikes a sympathetic note even before knowing the cause. It was not surprising therefore that the Raja-Guru caught the spirit of defiance of his daughter even before he listened to her narration.

Said she amidst sobs: "What shall I say, father? I have brought an indelible blot on your fair name. Did I not tell you I was going to the river to fetch water? I spread all your *puja*-materials and hurried to the river so that I could return quickly. On my way I saw the Prince at the river-bank. On seeing him, I bent my head down and went by a devious path, as a respectable woman. But taking advantage of my loneliness the Prince came behind me. Closing my mouth lest I should scream, he carried me to a sheltered spot where he tried to outrage my modesty. But I stoutly resisted. Enraged by my refusal, he tore my clothes, beat me and disfigured me like this. O! Father, what shall I do now? Where shall I go?"

The Raja-Guru's temper was rising like the mercury in the barometer. His aged moustaches, shot through with silver, trembled as his eyes became live embers. He became a second Rudra.

If affection discounts reasoning, passion puts a blinker on commonsense. The aged Raja-Guru could only understand that his daughter had been wronged and the wrong-doer, whoever he might be, must pay the penalty. So, not even caring to complete his *puja*, or to change his dress, the old man raced on bare foot to the palace where the guards gave him passage bowing like reeds before a tornado, and stood before the King breathing fire.

Rising from his throne the King rushed to meet him while the ministers and attendants stood in pin-drop silence.

"Maharaj! May I know the cause of your sudden visit?" asked the agitated King reverentially.

"The bull that I reared has pierced my own chest! Your son has been my undoing. He has wronged my daughter. Is that the reward for my being your Raja-Guru? O God!"

"Please be seated," expostulated the King. "I have not learnt at your feet for nothing. No wrong under my rule shall go unpunished, however exalted the perpetrator might be. I have little reason to doubt the veracity of your statement and therefore I am issuing immediate orders for beheading the culprit!"

So saying the King called his Minister and giving him his royal insignia, ordered: "Bring my son this moment and behead him for the heinous crime he has committed in my territory."

When the fates are cross even normal caution or intelligence on the part of people that matter gets befuddled. The King's Minister who could always see things in their proper perspective was led to philosophise: "What a tragedy that such an enlightened monarch should have such a son? Whoever thought that the Prince would turn out to be a scoundrel? The times are too bad."

Calling the executioners, the Minister passed on the royal decree for execution.

The minions of law did not have much difficulty in getting round to the Prince who had not moved an inch from the place of the alleged outrage. He was in reality awaiting his friend Chaturya, utterly oblivious of the storm that was raging in the palace.

It was therefore with a look of surprise that the Prince saw the executioners when they stood before him bowing.

Asked he: "What can I do for you?"

In reply they handed him the royal decree which said in unmistakable terms that he had to lose his head for the crime of misbehaving with the Guru's daughter.

"My God!" were the only words that escaped his lips. They were not agonising words; rather they pitied the ignorance and blind emotion that ruled the world. For one thing he had never expected his Guru's daughter to go and tell about her foolish behaviour; less to misrepresent; and certainly not to kill an innocent life. Finally he found within himself the magnanimity to exonerate everyone concerned in the affair and seek solace in his own fate, for he could never reconcile himself to the thought that, left to themselves any of the three—the Minister, Guruji or his own father—would ever have trusted a statement without examining it.

"I am ready. You can take me to the scaffold. But I have one request to make and that is to inform my friend Chaturya, the Minister's son, of the fate that is awaiting me and to tell him that I want to see him for a minute before I die."

The executioners agreed to this request and sent one of them to the palace for the purpose while the other two stood guard on the Prince.

Chaturya who had just seated himself for his lunch jumped on hearing that his friend wanted to see him urgently and calling the messenger inside asked him: "What for does he want to see me?"

The messenger replied: "What do I know, Sir? They said that the Prince outraged the modesty of the Raja-Guru's daughter and coming to know of it, the King has ordered his execution. The Minister, your father, gave us this order to carry out the King's instructions. When we went to execute the order, the Prince asked us to inform you of it and to tell you that he wanted to see you before he died."

Chaturya was stunned to hear it. "Something has gone wrong somewhere. O, why did I leave the Prince? Very foolish of me. I am to blame. It is up to me to save the Prince."

Thinking thus, he went to the stable from where he picked out two foremost steeds which he bathed and fed and collecting sufficient provision and clothes to last for some days and suitable weapons too, he rode one of them leading the other astride towards his friend, Prince Madana Kama who received him with a wan smile.

Embracing his friend, Chaturya asked him, "Tell me all that happened since I went!"

The Prince reported faithfully all that had happened between him and the Guruji's daughter without omitting any detail.

Upon this, Chaturya observed: "It is futile now to tell the truth for it will not pass for one. Further, your father is put in an embarrassing position. The world will certainly call him partial even if he is made to rescind the order. The best way is to wait and save both the father and son at a suitable moment!"

Addressing the executioners, Chaturya asked: "You have been listening to the narration of the Prince. This is a case where the offender escapes and the innocent has to suffer. But when truth comes to be known when it is too late, who knows what will happen and to whom? But if somehow both could be managed, i.e., the King's order be carried out and at the same time the truth be made known in a suitable manner so that injustice could be undone without cause for regret, that would amount to high statesmanship, superior wisdom. What do you say?"

"We would love to do so, for we believe the Prince's word. The King has only one son and any hasty action now will leave us without a monarch," replied the executioners.

Continuing they said, "We will show you a way out. Obey the King's order we must. So we suggest this: Let the Prince leave this country right now and not return for some time. On our part we will kill a fowl or a goat and show its blood to the King in proof of having done our duty. Let us wait and watch developments. But you must promise never to give us away."

Chaturya felt glad that his lead had borne fruit and hugging the executioners individually, said: "You are real patriots" and assured them.

The Prince was passive to this arrangement, for his mind was roving over a wide range of moral ground, being fascinated by his discovery that the human species could be so successfully vulgar as to twist untruth into truth and pass it under the cloak of respectability.

The five of them then staged a drama. The Prince allowed himself to be chained and led to the scaffold while the Minister's son Chaturya took a different route and waited for his friend at the hind-gate of the enclosure surrounding the scaffold.

The executioners, true to their word, released the Prince with the firm conviction that in disobeying their master they were obeying Truth or God who would never betray or fail them.

Finding the Prince waiting with a smile at the rendezvous, Chaturya bodily lifted him and threw him on the saddle of one of the two steeds that waited impatiently. Together they raced across valleys and hills for days together, eating the provisions which Chaturya had brought with foresight.

After journeying for several days and nights without stopping, Prince Madana Kama and his faithful friend Chaturya reached the city called Indrapura.

3. WOMEN OF THE PORTRAIT

NORMALLY Prince Madana Kama would have immensely relished a journey of the kind he had undertaken. But the events of the past few days had made him a passive spectator in an active drama. To the questions his friend Chaturya put him on the way, he gave but laconic replies which in their turn made Chaturya dispirited for a time. But the latter, being made of sterner stuff, was determined to make his Prince and pal turn over a new leaf.

There were no hotels in those days; travellers had to seek shelter either at the inns or board with families willing to take them for a consideration. Chaturya thought the inns much too public and prosaic. He felt that in the prevailing state of his mind the Prince would need some rest and privacy. With that thought, he made enquiries and found an aged lady willing to take them as lodgers.

Said Chaturya: "Mother! My friend and myself are strangers to this place. We come from a distant country and we want to stay for a few days. It is enough if you give us simple food and plain cots to lie down. We have brought two horses which we shall tie in your backyard beneath the shade of a tree. You must give them also corn and grass. For all these services we shall pay you a gold piece a day. We shall give you no trouble at all. You may treat us your own sons."

The old woman opened her toothless mouth and the wrinkles round her eyes widened in happiness. She immediately set about tidying up her guest-room which appeared to have seen no tenant for months. The agility with which she moved belied her age.

The Prince who had evinced no particular interest in anything hitherto, threw off his mask as it were, and volunteered to help the old woman in her work. Chaturya who had only been waiting for this moment, encouraged him by himself joining them in cleaning, sweeping, making the beds, spreading the mat, and even helping the woman draw water from the well. It is not unnatural for youngsters, who have too many comforts at home, to itch for giving a hand in the activities of other people's homes. Occasions were not wanting when what the two cubs could not accomplish was manoeuvred by the old woman when the three of them had a hearty laugh.

The two strangers had a comfortable bath, ate homely meals and slept soundly on tattered mats, having been thoroughly exhausted by a strenuous journey. While they were asleep, the old woman looked after the horses by scrubbing and feeding them.

Within the first few days, the Prince had completely shed his complexes and become his real self. His metallic laughter would ring over quite a distance. Complete rest and change had put him in good form and one day he said: "Chaturya, we have been idling for too long. Is it not time we got out and saw things for ourselves over here? My hands and legs itch for activity. Come, let us have a look around the city!"

Chaturya who was actually looking forward to it, replied: "Yes, most certainly. I was only waiting for you to get ready."

So saying, he went round to the improvised stable at the back of the house, saddled the horses and led them before his friend who, suitably dressed, jumped on one while Chaturya mounted the other. Noble men in those days took pride in riding on horses whereas we speed in automobiles today. The two friends walked the streets of the city in a leisured manner. Each was lined by rows of shops and the well-laid-out streets and prided on tall houses reaching out to the sky. At the end of their ride, they came in front of a mighty Shiva temple situated on an elevation. To their surprise the temple was bolted and sealed.

They asked a passer-by: "How long has the temple remained closed?"

"For quite some months," he replied.

"Why so?" asked the Prince.

"People would not pay their contributions and the authorities, not being able to meet even the expenses of the state, have kept the temple closed," replied he and went his way.

The Prince and Chaturya belonged to a generation which looked upon the worship of God with greater respect and responsibility than now. So they sought out the Chief Official of the city and finding him tolerant, asked "Why have you closed the Shiva temple, Sir?"

"What can I do, Sirs? We have no money with which to meet the expenses even of essential services."

"You mean to say that worship in the temples is not essential?" asked the Prince.

"No, not that way, but we have to meet expenses. But by the way, you look like royal personages. Why don't you sit down?" asked the Official in an effort to change the subject.

It took over an hour for the Prince and Chaturya to convince the Official that temple-worship was essential for the moral well-being of the community; that it demanded high priority inasmuch as the morale of the people was more important for a king than even wealth.

At the same time the Prince and Chaturya met representatives of the people of the place and impressed upon them that they should not fail to pay up the taxes as it affected vital functions like the upkeep of temples. They too agreed to pay.

The Official then and there issued orders for reopening the temple-gates and resumption of *puja*. Among the first to enter the temple after its reopening were the Prince and his friend Chaturya.

News got around of the resumption of *puja* and people started thronging its precincts with floral and other offerings. Indeed, from the smiles displayed on all faces, it became evident that they had regained their souls.

The Prince and Chaturya were among the first to offer prayers to the Shiva Linga installed gloriously on a crystal pedestal. Standing before it for a few moments, the Prince was immersed in contemplating on the deity which symbolised the embodied as well as the disembodied form of God the Almighty. As a result, he experienced immense relief from his anxieties and a sense of freshness and vigour pervaded his frame.

Following others, the two friends later went round the temple wondering at the immense thought and craftsmanship bestowed on its construction. The Prince admired how the ancients, in all they thought and did, always gave priority to the needs of society, with its graded evolution, aspirations and objectives. The idea of a common temple where one forgot one's worries and tried to merge with Perfection as distinct from individual homes with all its pettiness, appeared to him superb. The carvings with their riotous motifs, divinely beautiful statues and paintings revealing the eternal truths, catered to the diverse tastes and needs of individuals constituting humanity. All these individually and collectively converged towards the Omnipresence of the Great Reality.

In the northern *prakar* as they were looking at the paintings, there was one which attracted the Prince's attention. It was a portrait of two princesses in the bloom of youth and the rendering was so realistic that the two subjects looked almost speaking to him. It was not so much the technique that captivated the Prince as the subject itself. As far as the Prince could recollect, he had not seen any girls so beautiful, so completely arrayed in all the *samudrika-lakshanas* in all his life. A connoisseur of art himself, the Prince felt certain that the picture could not be born of any imagination however fertile. In fact, he intuitively recognised that there was an original for the subject of that portrait. At this awareness a valve in his heart automatically opened and sang a song with love for its theme!

There is small difference between a man in love and a man who is mad. While the former's malady is of shorter duration, the latter's is of longer duration. In both, commonsense will be the casualty. If you see a man smiling for no ostensible reason, he is either mad or love-mad. So when Prince Madana Kama put on a continuous smile, Chaturya became alarmed. When he asked his friend why he smiled, the Prince smiled again! That only confirmed Chaturya's suspicion.

For all his ingenuity Chaturya could not connect the contents of the portrait before them with his friend's mental disposition at all. To make matters worse, the Prince's breathing soon became heavy and transformed into hot sighs as beads of perspiration appeared in profusion round his temples. While he was undecided as to what he should do, the Prince became unsteady and fell down in a swoon.

Chaturya's sorrow knew no bounds. "Oh, God! Just when I thought the Prince was recovering from his shock, he has fallen unconscious. What shall I say to his parents? What ails my friend?" wept he.

Soon a small crowd collected round the two and noticing the Prince's condition, a woman brought water from the temple-well and sprinkled it on the Prince's face. The Prince opened his eyes and steadily stared at the portrait on the wall, placing his hand on his chest. Again he closed his eyes and opened them and repeated his stare. At this, Chaturya woke up to the reality. A smile played on his lips and confidence returned to him. Whispered Chaturya into the ears of his ailing friend: "Prince! Be of cheer. I shall bring them to you wherever they are, be they in this world or in any other. Take my word and buck up!"

On hearing these reassuring words, Prince Madana Kama sat up.

As there was no one to guide him as to whom the portrait referred to, Chaturya called on the trustee of the temple and announced himself as the son of a nobleman from a far-off country. Said he: "I have a friend with me who has fallen ill at the temple. He is a prince. While we looked round the temple, we came across a portrait of two young women with which my friend has become infatuated. Unless I get those girls for him my friend may not recover from his illness. I have come to you for helping me with any information you can give about that portrait."

The trustee was a large man with larger heart. He knew the ways of the world much too well to miss the point in Chaturya's request. Said he: "Young man! I quite understand your friend's condition. These girls have a way with young hearts which is quite calamitous. But I am afraid I can't be of much help to your friend because I do not know who the girls are at all!"

"But surely the painter who did it must be knowing?" asked Chaturya.

"I don't know. Who did the painting? Let me see. I remember. It was one Venkayya from the city of Devakipur. But I can't say if he is alive, for I have had no contact with him since."

"How old was he when he did this portrait and how long ago?" asked Chaturya.

"Oh, he must have been round about fifty then and it is less then ten years since he did it. Why?" asked the trustee.

"He will now be sixty at the most and that is not the age of despair, you know! I shall take a chance, as something tells me that he is alive. How does one go to Devakipur?" persisted Chaturya.

Thereupon the benevolent trustee gave full particulars of the route, places to stop, etc. and also a letter of introduction to the painter.

Deeply bowing to him Chaturya said: "I cannot adequately express my indebtedness to your goodself for your help. But I have one more request to make and that is to have an eye on my friend during my absence. I do not know how long I may be away. Maybe days or even years. But I shall leave enough money with you. Not that he would give you any trouble. Only I want you to have a fatherly eye on him and keep his spirit up."

"You can depend upon me to do that!" replied the trustee with a grin.

Withdrawing from his presence, Chaturya made straight to the temple where the Prince was alternately falling unconscious and getting awake.

At his recovery, Chaturya said: "Friend, I am now on my way to find out those girls and bring them to you. Will you be good enough to be of good cheer till I return? The trustee of this temple has very kindly agreed to look after your needs. I have made every arrangement for your comfortable stay here. All that I now want of you is to have faith in your friend."

Prince Madana stood up and embracing Chaturya bade him adieu with tear-filmed eyes, after which he settled down before the object of his attraction.

The trustee who came there soon after, chatted with the Prince for a while and said: "Know that you have a friend in me. Anything you want, you know where to find?" and patting him on his shoulder, went away.

Chaturya raced on his horse towards his destination—Devakipur. Many were the mountains and forests he had to cross on the way. He did not stop anywhere except for slaking the thirst of the animal he was riding. On the eleventh day he reached Devakipur.

Not having the patience even to have a wash, he straight went to the local choultry where he made enquiries of the painter Venkayya. All the while he was fighting with his own fears that the painter might not be alive.

4. CHATURYA DISCOVERS THE GIRLS

THE mind is a fascinating subject of study. The least that can be said of it is that it is imponderable, and that is perhaps why psychologists often trip against it. When you know that a certain thing cannot happen, your mind persists in believing the possibility of its happening, and would likewise love to disbelieve another that you would rather not have.

For instance, Chaturya very well knew that the painter who was about sixty years old had but an one-in-ten chance of surviving and yet his mind refused to believe he was dead: that made him cross the mountains and forests and race towards Devakipur. But then, it must be said in fairness to him that it was neither desperation nor foolhardiness that made him venture on that step. He did not himself know at that time what it was that planted faith in him and drove him after this mad search. Call it intuition, destiny, or the story-teller's incentive.

To the village of Devakipur, the arrival of a royal courier was an event of unforgettable importance and it was no wonder that all sorts of people from the oldest cronies to the tiniest toddlers streamed out of their houses to have a close look at Chaturya and his animal and know the purpose of his visit.

Chaturya scanned the faces of the people who had assembled there with his heart in his mouth, although he knew next to nothing what Venkayya would look like. He vaguely associated him with the artist's satchel as though he expected him to hang it round his neck. There were of

COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS
NEW DELHI
12496

course many aged and infirm persons in the crowd but no one answered to his imagination. His heart almost prompted that someone would proclaim himself as Venkayya, but not reading any signs of comprehension of this quest on their faces, he got down from his charger and did the obvious by joining his palms in greeting them all.

Children have a way with strangers that older men often have reason to envy. They have less difficulty in befriending strangers. Chaturya who knew the art of handling a crowd, lifted a young baby that had crawled on his feet and planted it on the back of his horse to the immense satisfaction of the spectators. Well begun is half done, and right from that moment Chaturya became their hero. After playing with the children he asked them: "I have come here in search of one Venkayya, a painter of repute, and wish to pay my respects to him. I do not know if he. . . ."

"Oh, yes. Venkayya lives right at the end of the street. I will take you there......" replied they in chorus.

One can only imagine the state of Chaturya's mind at that time. The affirmation was like *manna* falling right into his mouth from heaven. It took some time for him to reconcile himself to the new situation but his happiness lasted only for a short while; for a new doubt seized Chaturya: "Suppose," he thought, "Venkayya says he drew the pictures out of his imagination!"

Notwithstanding this doubt, Chaturya allowed himself to be led in the direction of Venkayya's house. It was an old thatched hovel which received a liberal share of sun's rays. There were no ceremonies like waiting till one was called in, and all that. The urchins literally dragged Chaturya by his hands into the doorless gate, and there, at the far end of a bench sat an old man with a pair of steel-rimmed glasses cocked up on his nose looking up with some annoyance at the unceremonious intrusion.

"There! That is Venkayya!" cried the children

Chaturya who almost missed a beat of his heart on seeing him, felt like Hanuman spotting Sita at Lanka. He spontaneously fell on all fours in prostration before the old man and when he stood up, the old man invited him to sit beside him. Then the crowd melted away.

It was not difficult for Chaturya to ingratiate himself into the affection of Venkayya whose handiwork he praised to the skies. For quite a week, Chaturya did not disclose the purpose of his visit but went on rendering service to the old man who apparently lived all alone. Venkayya too, like all old men, told colourful stories of his early days, how he learnt the art at the feet of his *guru* and how he became the hot favourite of kings and queens.

On the eleventh day however as the two were having their food, Chaturya asked: "Venkayyaji, was it not you who painted those pictures in the Shiva temple at Indrapuri?"

"Oh, yes. They were among the last ones I did. Did you see them?" asked Venkayya.

"Surely. I was particularly fascinated by one among them—the portrait of two princesses. They looked so lifelike," replied Chaturya.

"Yes, you are right. They were painted by me and modelled after two real persons from a token I got," said Venkayya.

"I thought as much. But if you have no objection, can you tell me who they were and what that token was?" persisted Chaturya.

"What objection can there be to you, my son? They are the daughters of King Bhimaraj of yonder Bhimapuri. I have a friend there who serves in the palace. He had invited me once to his house and while there, he showed me a lock of hair belonging to those girls. From my knowledge of *Samudrika sastra* I conjured up the forms of the girls which I painted and my friend who happened to see the sketch later confirmed they were lifelike, as though I had had the very girls for my models," said Venkayya enthusiastically.

"I am sure they are," echoed Chaturya and swallowing a lump in his throat, continued, "but is it difficult to see them? Not that I am interested in seeing them."

"It is very difficult to see them as they are in *purdha* and no male can ever hope to see them."

"But, I suppose they must now be married."

"No, not yet."

"I see. Your friend of Bhimapuri—is he still in palace service?"

"Yes, he had been here hardly a month back."

"I am likely to pass through Bhimapuri on my onward journey. So, would you kindly give me a chit to him?"

"Oh, that is not necessary. He is a very nice man. His name is Muthial Naik and his wife's name Lakshmakka. She comes from Vidarbha. She has never gone to her parents' home since marrying him, imagine! Not even her brother has visited her, although she was just a child when she married my friend. Now they have one son and one daughter," said Venkayya.

On hearing these details, Chaturya chalked out his own plans. On the following day, he informed the old painter that he was going on a visit to a neighbouring village and rode fast to Bhimapuri.

The first thing he did on reaching the place was to go to the bazaar and purchase a *sari* and a *dhoti* with *jari,* clothes for youngsters and a basketful of fruits, flowers and sweets. All that load he put on the head of a servant and went to the quarters where palace servants lived. He asked one of them he met on the way where Muthial Naik lived. Added he. "I am his brother-in-law just coming from Vidarbha. My sister came here while a young girl and we have never seen her afterwards. I have now come to pay her a visit."

That man happened to be a neighbour of Muthial's so he took Chaturya directly to Muthial's place where Chaturya placed on a stool the gifts he had brought and nearing the woman started whimpering: "My dear sister! You left us when you were barely five. How we missed you! Before they died, father and mother had been telling me, your brother, to go and see you once at least, and I have not been able to do so till now. How you have changed!" and wiping his tears, he pointed to the boy and girl standing by her and asked. "Are these, sister, your children?"

By then Lakshmakka too started wiping her tears with her apron and felt choked with emotion. The brother and sister had many things to talk about, but before settling down, Chaturya distributed the sweets, shirts and frocks to the children and the flowers and *sari* to Lakshmakka, and as though remembering for the first time, he asked her: "Where is your husband?"

"He will return now from the palace, brother. It is time. With all warmth I welcome you into my home, brother!" Saying this she took him inside and spread a mat on which he sat.

The children who had by now taken to Chaturya fondly, surrounded him and by the time Lakshmakka brought him milk and fruits to partake, Muthial returned from his duty.

Muthial, who had been intercepted on the way with the news of his rich brother-in-law's arrival, had little difficulty in receiving him without formalities. Chaturya promptly presented the *jari-dhotis* to him. The entire family soon sat around a wholesome meal prepared by the lady of the house to celebrate the happy event.

Muthial, who had been longing to present his children with good apparel and himself wear one of those *jarī* turbans, was immensely pleased with the presents his brother-in-law had brought. In this new-found joy the whole family swam for a couple of days. Sensing it, Chaturya one day asked Muthial, "Brother, does this King have any sons?"

"No, he has two daughters only and very beautiful ones," replied he.

"I see, is it possible for me to see them?"

'No, they are yet unmarried, and the King has become so impossible that whoever comes and asks for their hands he kills. Consequently, no one ventures to propose to them."

"Let me see: where exactly is your work-spot?"

"Adjoining the harem."

"I see. Will you do one thing for me? Tomorrow you take me to your work-spot and in a room facing the harem arrange for me the ceremonial oil-massage. While doing so, you play all the 32 *talas* vociferously, on hearing which the princesses will surely look out of the balcony and peep. I shall without being seen have a look at them at that time. If they ask you, tell them that your brother-in-law has come from the village and as you were busy with the King in the palace, you agreed to give me the customary oil-massage here itself and that I would go home presently. Is that all right?"

Muthial had to agree to this under the special circumstances, because, in the domestic hierarchy, the brother-in-law has a place second only to God. And the two started towards the palace, taking with them all the paraphernalia to execute the plan. Chaturya selected a suitable place for the operation and Muthial started the *malish* with rhythmic movements of the palm in *tala* patterns. As the tempo of *tala* increased, it caught the ears of the princesses next-door. Out of curiosity, the two sisters opened their glass-window and straining their necks called out to Muthial and asked: 'Whom are you massaging with such gusto?"

"My brother-in-law has come from his native village after a long time. As I had much work here, I called him here to give him the customary massage. He will now return to my place for his bath."

While they were thus conversing, Chaturya could clearly see the reflections of the two princesses on the oil in the broad vessel which he had kept below the window. Before they closed the door, he had made an accurate appraisal of their extraordinary beauty and made sure that they were the exact originals of the figures on the portrait.

Returning to Muthial's home, Chaturya finished bathing and as he sat down to partake of his food, his mind went over the scene he had just returned from, and reflected.

"Not for nothing has my friend fallen in love with these damsels. I can very well reveal my identity before the King and seek the hands of the girls for the Prince, but the fool has placed a heavy premium on the heads of those who seek her! What a calamity! Are my labours after all going to fall on barren soil? As things are, nothing short of divine guidance can help me out of this situation."

That night, Chaturya took leave of Muthial, his wife and children and riding his horse went in the direction of the sea.

5. LORD SHANKARA TO THE RESCUE

NEVER promise what you cannot fulfil, is a maxim that holds good only for ordinary men, for it presupposes a limited vision, will and ability. It applies to great men no more than, say, the weather to the sun. It is the sun that makes the weather and it is great men that tame the wildest of energies, nuclear power, today.

If Chaturya had been rash, according to us, in promising his friend what was near-impossible, it was no fault of his; for, in the ordinary course, it was no more difficult to fetch a bride for a friend in those days than earning a living today. Whoever would despair of getting a job, except the imbecile?

With all his faith and heart, Chaturya has plunged into the self-appointed task and had surmounted many a difficulty which would have deterred lesser men.

Only when he was about to reach the end of his quest did he find himself totally frustrated.

There are limits to the endurance or capabilities of even the best among us; or else we will not be human. It is at such limit that we really are put to the test. It is at this last hour of trial that most fail and do so because then the last shred of faith dies. The infinitesimal portion of us that succeed, persons like Prahlada and Appar, are great because of their rock-like faith in the Great Reality that refuses to be extinguished, and which in the final analysis is the arbiter of destiny.

When, after crossing deep forests, Chaturya reached the sea-shore, he thought: “Of what use is my continuing to live in this world? In all humility and earnestness did I promise my friend and master to bring him the object of his love. At the Shiva temple he is now hovering between life and death, his life poised on my assurance. Here, at the end of my labours, I am faced with a granite wall. If I disregard the report and ask of the King his daughter, I have no means of escaping the death of an ignoramus and sooner or later the Prince will hear of my end. If I return to my friend to report my failure, then too, shall I most assuredly prove to be the harbinger of his death, to be followed by my own. If, on the contrary, I quietly sacrifice my worthless life at the feet of the sea-god, my friend will, in the absence of news about or from me, most likely live longer, and perhaps, god Varuna, pleased with my sacrifice, may fulfil the object of the quest on which I had embarked."

Deciding thus to end his life by throwing himself into the sea, Chaturya dismounted and fondly caressing the horse which had faithfully served him, said: "Yours has been a more fruitful life, for you have not failed your master even once, but I am less fortunate. May my ignominious life end today and I give you freedom to go your way. May God bless you!" and threw the reins and bits away and walked down into the sea.

Often have animals been accused as lacking in understanding of the kind that human beings arrogate to themselves. Any intelligent observer can see through this untruth. Who has not seen the cat purring at the door at tea time even when you have shut the door against it? Chaturya's horse which was highly pedigreed appeared to thoroughly understand his master's predicament and tragic intent, for tears rolled down its cheeks as, instead of throwing up its legs in its new-found freedom, it solemnly followed its master into the waters.

Here you had two souls as far apart as a man and a horse. One had entered the sea, completely abiding in the faith that, by sacrificing his life at the feet of Varuna, the Almighty might be pleased to grant what he failed to accomplish. He had thus without knowing it himself, surrendered his ego to the Lord with absolutely no thought of reward for self. The other is a horse which, intuitively understanding its master's decision, cannot think of parting from him even at death, thus consciously giving up its identity or ego, if it had one.

Where there is no ego there is God. As though to make this quite manifest, the ocean would not submerge them, even though Chaturya and the horse advanced far into the sea. The surface of the sea-water touched them only at the knees. Does not the proverb say that the sea is only knee-deep for him who has no fear of death?

Soon Chaturya, observing the sorry phenomenon, became worried, and lamented: "Lord! Why are you not pleased to accept my sacrifice? Am I such a bad sinner as to be unfit to be offered at your feet? I do not mind how you treat me, but I have my friend who hovers between life and death on a promise made by me. Oh, Shankara! Won't you, for my friend's sake, accept my life as sacrifice?"

At that moment Lord Shankara and Mother Parvati in their routine journey happened to be moving in the skies over that part of the sea. When Chaturya's lament fell on Parvati's ears, her tender heart was deeply touched. She spoke to her lord: "Lord! A devotee of yours calls you piteously. If we do not attend to his needs immediately we may have to pay dearly for neglect. Please let us go to him."

Agreeing with his beloved spouse, the two of them appeared before the anguished Chaturya and asked: "Whv did you invoke Shankara's name, young man?"

Chaturya who was far too enlightened had the least difficulty in identifying the two as the Primordial Father and Mother. Bowing devotedly before them, he supplicated: "The Vedas say that you are the most merciful, and yet why are you not pleased to let me die at your feet?"

"Lad! What made you take this step?"

"Lord! I had no other course except this left to me. My friend Prince Madana Kama wanted to marry the Princesses of the portrait in the Shiva temple. After great trouble did I locate the Princesses. But I am unable to go and ask their hands for my friend; for, their father kills every suitor. Not being able to surmount this difficulty, I decided to immolate myself into the sea. Unfortunately even the sea would not accept me!"

The Lord on hearing his version, turned askance at Parvati who nudged him at his rib, whereupon the Lord said: "My son! Do not be foolish. Go back to the town and stay there. After a few days, you will hear the peal of a divine bell. You alone will hear it. On hearing it, put on your royal robes and loiter in the thoroughfare. Soon, royal messengers will come there and question you. Tell them you are a prince come from another country to stay there for a few days only. They will call you to the palace, but you put them off saying that you had no work with the King. Later, the King himself will come personally and invite you to the palace, offering to give his daughters to you in marriage. You agree and go with him. Do not get upset. At the marriage, you need not tie the *mangalya sutra,* but get it done by a Brahmin *sumangali*. My desire is that, ultimately, your friend should marry the elder sister and you should marry the younger sister. This is my bidding."

Saying this, the Lord disappeared.

Chaturya's heart heaved even as the waves of the sea. He thought himself the most fortunate, not because the Lord vouchsafed him *darshan,* but because he had been able to fulfil his friend's desire. Long did he stay there, beatified by the vision and after offering his heart-felt prayers, returned to the city, followed by the lusty neighs of his faithful horse. He was anxiously awaiting the day and hour of the divine peal.

6. CHATURYA "MARRIES"

THE woman is the greatest catalytic agent known to the world. Money and the rest of things only come next to her. Under her influence man become generous, oftentimes, to absurdity. Lord Shankara in this instance played, under the influence of Parvati, exactly his human exemplar.

Not till he walked a few steps after leaving Chaturya did he realise how far he had entangled himself in Chaturya's affair. Under Parvati's spell he had been wild in his promise, he reflected. What was the use of grieving over spilt milk?

However, unlike the human counterpart, Shankara did not try to pick a convenient loophole to baulk. On the contrary, he grimly set to work on the plan whereby he could carry out the promise.

Not willing to let his partner know of his disenchantment, Shankara put on the best of faces and slipping his hand into hers, walked moodily into a dilapidated *mutt* nearby.

Women are proverbially catty. Mother Parvati who could easily see through her Lord's mental working put on a mask of ignorance as long as her object was being fulfilled. One wished other women too took the cue from her and not spoiled for a fight for imagined reasons but get things done quietly.

In pursuit of his objective the easiest impersonation Shankara could take on was that of the *sannyasin* as the saffron robes had always commanded the respect both of kings and the masses, thanks more perhaps, to Viswamitra and Durvasa. With the matted hair neatly done up, sacred ashes shining like daylight all over his body, the tiger-skin tidily rolled up and slung over his shoulders, the traditional water-pot in one hand and the yogic crutch on the other, the Lord strode majestically into the royal palace leaving Parvati back in the care of his sacred bull.

The measured rat-tat of his wooden sandals on the polished floors put the palace-servants on the alert and when his saffron robes came into view, they flung themselves on all fours before him. As the *sannyasin* gracefully acknowledged the salutations of the guards, door after door opened before him until he stood before the throne from which the King hurriedly descended to offer his respects to the visitor.

Preliminaries over, the King asked: "Revered Sir, I am most blessed by your arrival. If I can be of any service to your holy self, I shall feel it a great favour and privilege."

"Rajasekhara! I have come here not with any particular business in mind. I thought I could dine with you today. That is all!"

"I am most blessed. I pray, please accept my hospitality not only for today, but as long as your holiness likes!"

With that, the King escorted the august visitor to the sacred room of the palace, where he personally supervised arrangements for his comfortable stay. He engaged special cooks to prepare food in a suitable manner for the visitor.

As was the custom, the King waited on the sage to serve food personally.

At that time the sage asked the King "Rajasekhara! Would you call your sons?"

The King who felt embarrassed and grieved at the same time, replied: "Revered Sir, I have not been blessed with sons. But I have two daughters."

"Is that so? Then do call your daughters here, if you don't mind."

The King hurriedly sent word to his daughters who presently came and stood before the sage bowing.

"They are quite good-looking. You are a lucky man!" said the sage and cracking jokes with the girls, he smeared the sacred ash on their forehead and blessed them.

"I hope they are happily married?" asked the sage to the King.

"Not yet, Sir!" replied the King apologetically.

The sage's countenance became grave and he said: "So grown up and not married! I am sorry I made a mistake in accepting hospitality at the hands of a sinner like you!"

No sooner had those words been uttered than the sage vanished.

The King at once realised that it was no other than Lord Shankara who had come to him and by thus refusing his hospitality, he had reprimanded him for his brutality in killing all the suitors to his daughters' hands.

He genuinely regretted his pig-headedness, and then and there, decided to have his daughters married to the first prince that came his way.

Following this decision, he called his ministers and ordered: "Comb the entire city and find out if any princes are staying. If there be any, bring them right here. You can even use force in doing so, if need be."

After sending his ministers on this quest, he sent for the state-astrologers.

On their arrival the King asked them to fix up the *muhurt* or the time for the marriage, of his two girls on the earliest date possible.

While the astrologers were scanning the planetary influences, the ministers and their aides frantically searched the hotels, the bazaars and places of amusement for stray princes.

Lord Shankara reaching the *mutt* where he had left his spouse, related to her his adventure with the King. The great Mother caressed His cheeks as a reward for listening to her and the Lord at that time was certainly not in a repentant mood.

Suddenly, however, Shankara saw in his mind's eye the furore that was going on in the streets and recollected that he had to intimate Chaturya to put him on the alert if his plans were to work. So he tolled the sacred bell to be heard by Chaturya alone, lest it should, by rousing other princes in town, complicate issues.

Chaturya was totally unprepared to hear the peals of the divine bell within so short a time. He never thought that things would move so swiftly. But he was nevertheless not less happy about it.

He jumped like a baby grabbing at a colourful toy. Soulfully praying to Lord Shankara for his great mercy, he hurriedly put on the best royal robes like the crown, *kundala, keyura,* swords etc. and literally ran to the bazaar so that he would not be missed by the royal minions.

Just as anticipated, the royal messengers literally swooped on Chaturya as soon as he reached the market-place.

Chaturya, however, pretended as though he knew nothing about it and started moving away.

Said they: "Sir, we are in search of a prince and we hope you are one."

Chaturya: "You are right. But why should you want me?"

Messengers: "The King would like to meet you for an important purpose."

Chaturya: "I have nothing to do with your King. I came to this city in a private capacity to amuse myself. I need no reception. I shall be content to remain a comman man. Tell him that I thank him for his invitation."

Messengers: "No sir; but this is important. Our King wants you somehow or other."

Chaturya: "What do you mean? I say I do not want anything from your King. I have not committed any crime. If on top of it all you persist in wanting me, I shall go away from this city."

Messengers: "We have orders to bring you by force, if need be."

Chaturya: "O, ho! It has come to that? I hope you won't be so foolish as to lay hands on me, for you will regret it."

The royal messengers in their eagerness not to miss getting the one prince whom they were able to spot, started closing in on him at which Chaturya unsheathed his sword.

Fortunately the King who was looking out from his balcony for news about his quest noticed this development and immediately sent word that he was personally coming down to meet the prince and that the prince might be detained and respectfully treated till then.

Chaturya on receiving the news, inwardly felt that everything was running according to schedule, yet he pulled a long face awaiting the King's arrival.

Soon the crowd gave way to the King who was followed by a party of officials who came bearing auspicious greetings like the *purnakumbha,* silver and gold platter carrying fruits, flowers, ornate clothes and jewels in their hands. As the King stood aside, this party met Chaturya first and handed him the greetings. There could now be no mistaking the King's intentions.

As though to make things more clear, the King addressed Chaturya: "Sir, it may please you to hear that I have decided to give my daughters to you in marriage. I have only two daughters and no sons. Please accept them. If my messengers had behaved rudely please pardon me!"

Chaturya's chest heaved as his eyes went heavenward in acknowledgement of his debt of gratitude to the Lord who, when he was completely at sea, like the Father of Creation that He was, gave him not merely lease of his life but, more, helped bring about the success of his mission.

Replied Chaturya: "Excuse me, Sir, I am a little surprised and worried about your request, for I very well know that, in the past, you did not take kindly to the suitors to your daughters' hands. When I think of the fate of those princes, I shudder. Please leave me alone!"

The King bowed his head in shame, but with tear-laden eyes replied: "What you say is true, prince. I was a fool. I sincerely regret it, now that my eyes have been opened by the Lord, I can guarantee that no harm shall befall you. Please believe me."

Chaturya: "I am satisfied with your guarantee. I want another assurance; and that is, the marriage should be performed in accordance with the custom prevailing in my country!"

King: "O, sure with pleasure. Please come with me to the palace."

By this time everything had been made ready for a ceremonial procession and reception for the bridegroom. Elephants and horses went first. Standard-bearers flanked the entire route as the crowd cheered lustily: "Long live the King! Long live the Bridegroom!"

During Chaturya's stay in the palace, all his comforts were attended to by a fleet of officials. Whenever Chaturya had occasion to move into the veranda, girls from the zenana peeped on the sly and cracked jokes at him. But Chaturya was far from being the happy bridegroom. He did not come there seeking a bride. He was fully conscious of his mission at all times and knew that he was walking on the razor's edge. Great men neither fear nor falter.

The city of Bhimapuri went agog with excitement as the day of marriage neared. On the appointed day the capital was *enfete*. Scores of bands blared auspicious tunes. Crowds of distinguished visitors kept pouring into the wide portals of the palace. The *muhurt* drew near. The brides and bridegroom sat before the Vedic fire attired in resplendent garments. Vedic hymns chanted in full throat vied with songs sung by the palace bards and women. The *mangalya sutras* went in circulation for blessing and as the priest handed them to Chaturya to tie round the brides' necks, he said: "Sir, in my place, the bridegroom does not tie the *sutra* but Brahmin *sumangalis* do that. Would you therefore have it done likewise?"

The priest consulted the Chief Minister by his side who, in view of the King's previous assurance to Chaturya, nodded assent.

As the piper blew at his shrillest and the trumpets blared in their highest, the *sutras* were tied round the necks of the two princesses by *sumangalis* when the brides alternatively looked at their future lord through the corner of their eye-lashes and beamed. The one man who did not share the joy and sat glum was Chaturya and the one man happiest, if there could be one, was the King.

The festivities continued for five days continuously with eclat and the King gave away gifts on a lavish scale to mark the happy occasion.

The summer-house of the King which was set in idyllic surroundings, had been converted into a garden of the Love-God. The decorations were most artistic and tasteful. Incence and perfumes of a hundred variety filled the atmosphere for miles around.

On the night of the fifth day, after food, to the accompaniment of Vedic chants and music, the brides and bridegroom were ushered into the nuptial chamber which looked like Devendra's pavilion.

Inside the chamber, as the two coy maidens dressed like *apsaras*, stood by the window nibbling at their finger-nails, Chaturya started snoring on the cosy bed provided for him.

7. THE FIRST NIGHT

THE first night of married life is a rare occasion for both husband and wife. It was particularly so in those days when the bride and bridegroom would only then get to know each other for the first time. The law of marriage did not provide for divorce; it was unthinkable. Man and woman had been destined to marry, and there was no question of exercising or withholding conjugal rights. They knew only of duties. With the glorious quartet of *purusharthas* set before them, men and women eagerly looked forward to the identity of spirit which alone would lead to the consummation of their lives.

When the Princesses of Bhimapuri saw to their disappointment their husband sleeping deeply, they did not think of the divorce court. They felt slightly embarrassed and waited patiently, thinking that he was tired and would soon wake up. The older of the two soon shook off her temporary disappointment and went near Chaturya. Bending over him, she found him perspiring profusely. So she wiped the beads of sweat off his forehead with her handkerchief and unbuttoned his tight upper jacket. Feeling him shiver under her touch, she withdrew and looked at him with motherly tenderness. Soon her womanly instinct made her reach out for the lute and sitting at the far end of his cot, she played a tune which would bring home to the hearer the anguish of her heart. She saw him tossing about in bed in great discomfort, probably caused by her plaintive melody. She knew the psychological moment when she gently laid her hands on him and Chaturya sat up with a jerk.

Success makes women meek and the Princess stood up, her head cast down, although her lips curled in sweet triumph. Chaturya breathed hard and the Princess beamed at him from under her eyelashes.

After a tense silence the Princess again took the initiative and asked: "My lord appears to have been greatly tired by the events of the day."

"Er-er-yes; to a certain extent," came the reply.

Encouraged, the Princess brought the platter of sweets and fruits, and taking some in her hands, said: "I could see that. If my lord takes these sweets and a cup of hot milk, he will get over his weariness."

Keeping her at arm's length, Chaturya helped himself to the excellent preparations placed before him, all the while chatting freely, but without making any commitment. How long could he put off the legitimate aspirations a woman who, in all honesty, believed that she was his rightful wife, ordained and anointed by gods and men?

When finally the Princess left him in no doubt of her determination, Chaturya shuddered as he thought of the sacredness of his mission. He decided to cool her passion off rather than bluff her, and adopted the most harmless means in his power—lure her into listening to fanciful stories and thus divert her interest in other matters.

"Princess!" he addressed her, "I have always found that one should listen to a good story before retiring to bed, for, invariably, listening to one not only soothes one's nerves but helps one greatly to enjoy a good sleep, to rise well refreshed and invigorated in the morning. I think you should also get into that habit. What do you say?"

On hearing this, the Princess at once agreed and drew a chair to his side and sat on it. Finding that she had relaxed, Chaturya narrated the following story:

There was a city by name Dharmapuri and its ruler was called Dharma-nanda. He ruled in a manner that was the envy of gods, but his personal life had a dark patch: he was childless for a long time. On the advice of elders and people who knew the *shastras,* he performed several *shantis,* built temples, resuscitated tanks, gave away gifts in plenty and performed all meritorious acts. As a result, God blessed him with a male child whom he brought up with great affection and care.

He did not thereafter stop doing those *dharmas,* having obtained his objectives. Rather his belief in *dharma* increased and he doubled and quadrupled them. As luck would have it, he got another son three years later. He brought them up like his twin eyes.

Cynics say that God is jealous as He allows no man to live in perfection to the very end of his life. The reason according to them is that, otherwise, man would cease to think of Him. Although on the face of it, the argument may appear plausible, it is manifestly absurd and can only pass for a joke, for who can conceive of the Great Mercy, the Great Benevolence, to be jealous, least of all, of man, the flower of His creation? But the truth is that man harvests the fruits of his own actions which are mixed in character and that accounts for the vicissitudes of life.

King Dharma-nanda's cycle of prosperity too came to a sudden halt when the neighbouring chiefs combined together and captured his city unawares. The worst part of it was that they drove the King, the Queen and their two children out of the city without a rupee in their pockets!

The erstwhile King had practically to beg his way to keep their bodies and souls together.

Days rolled by. The royal family had become a confirmed beggar-family. Yet their nobility never left them. The ex-King never cared to put by for the morrow. Maybe, as some think, it was absurd. But he had no thought for the morrow. One day Dharma-nanda thought: "It is all right for me to spend the rest of my life begging, but what would become of the children? What if they become "beatniks" or delinquents? The entire blame will be mine. By hook or by crook, I must have them educated!"

With this thought he entered a village and made enquiries as to whether there were any schools willing to take students without fee of any kind. Finding none, he went to a learned Brahmin who taught boys, and prostrating himself before him, said: "Learned Sir, I am a very poor man and I live by begging. I want to educate my two boys. If you agree to take them into your care and teach them both, I shall give one of the boys as your *dakshina* (fee)."

The learned Brahmin looked at the boys and finding them smart and intelligent, agreed to the proposal. Dharmananda heaved a sigh of relief and left the boys there. After staying in the same village for some more days by begging, he and his wife left for another, leaving the children behind. Their sorrow in so doing can only be imagined and all the more so, when one recalls they were ex-king and ex-queen.

The Brahmin teacher, in the meanwhile, worked on another plan of action. He put the elder prince in charge of his cowshed for looking after the cows, taking them out for grazing, bathing, feeding, etc., and hardly ever taught him. But he taught the younger prince scrupulously all the Vedas, *shastras* and the *vidyas* in all of which he soon became an adept. The *vidyas* dealt with miraculous performances like levitation, transmigration, flying in the air, making gold out of iron and things of the kind.

Soon the younger prince acquired skilled knowledge of *vidyas* and *shastras.* At the same time he started gaining insight into his master's plan and intentions regarding himself and his brother. This worried him; for he knew well that the object of his parents in educating them was, apart from duty, that they would support their parents in old age. But his *guru* apparently would so manipulate as to keep him, the younger, back as *dakshina* and return to his parents his brother who was ill-equipped for the purpose for which he was required. The least that he could do under the circumstance was to inform his parents about his *guru's* intention.

One day, therefore, the younger prince decided to contact his parents, but they had left no address nor did they ever write to him. So he applied one of the *Vidyas* he had learnt, which gave him the cosmic vision. He could spot his parents at a far-off village. He was very much grieved to find them still eking out a living by the begging bowl. That night, the younger prince took the form of a *garuda* and flew to where they were. Descending into the inn where they were sleeping, he woke them after resuming his real form.

Said he: "Father, I am your second son come to see you on an important matter."

The Nanda couple became delirious with joy on seeing their son well grown up and good-looking and after embracing and blessing him, asked: "How did you manage to come here at the dead of night?"

He replied: "Father, I learnt all the *vidyas* at the feet of my *guru* and with the aid of one, I took the form of a *garuda* and flew to see you."

The amazement of his parents was only equalled by their eagerness to learn more about him and his brother. They asked: "How is your elder brother?"

"I have come here on purpose. My *guru* is very great no doubt, but I am sorry to say that he does not play fair with us. He hardly, if ever, teaches brother. He has put him on the task of tending his cows. But he has taught me everything he knows. Of that I am sure. Now, I suspect, he may so manoeuvre as to keep me as his *dakshina* and return brother to you. Of course, I am happy to serve my *guru* and allow my brother to join you. But in the present state of my brother, for reasons easy to guess, he is hardly equipped to protect you from want. So I want to beat my *guru* at his own game by keeping you informed about his real intentions. When you come to claim one of us, do not be put off by any ruse. You know what to do. It is getting late for me. I must get back before my *guru* learns about my absence."

Bowing before them, he reluctantly left the place and resuming the form of the *garuda* flew straight into his room at the *ashrama*.

After a couple of days ex-King Dharma-nanda came to the *guru*, as though in the normal course. On seeing them, the *guru* became flurried and urgently sent one of his pupils to fetch the elder prince who was out in the forest grazing cows. In the meantime, he received the Nanda pair and made them stay in his house and looked after their comforts most solicitously.

As soon as the elder prince arrived, the *guru* gave him a good scrubbing and a nice bath and trapping him with the paraphernalia of the monitor of his class, seated him at the head of his pupils. He put the second boy in a secluded corner and gave him a penal exercise by putting shackles on him. Then he sent for the Nanda pair, who on seeing their children—their future hope—forgot all their sorrows.

"You will be glad to hear that your elder boy is my top pupil; take a look at him. He controls all the other students and he is a very capable boy," said the *guru*. He went on:

"Look, here is your younger boy. He is very poor in his studies and that is why I have penalised him."

What the Nanda couple saw and heard only confirmed their son's warning, and without in the slightest degree giving themselves away said: "I am so grateful to you, Sir, for doing your best. It is only right that we should give over to you the brighter boy as *dakshina* and be content with the second boy. We shall do our very best for him."

Saying this, they took hold of the hand of their younger son and walked out of the school.

The stunned *guru* bit his lips, saying: "Man proposes but God disposes!" Contenting himself with this thought, he sent back the elder boy to the woods to look after the cows.

The Nanda couple who took the second boy walked a few miles and stopping at a wayside inn denied themselves that night's meal and gave the meagre food they had preserved during the day to their son.

When the day broke, the younger prince addressed his father: "Father, it pains me to see you go without food for my sake. At the moment we have no money whatsoever. But I have my wits and the learning I received from my *guru*. I shall presently make use of them and see that you do not need to beg or starve."

"How will you manage that, son? Do tell us," asked his parents.

"Listen, father. I shall presently convert myself into a pedigree cock. I know that the King of this place has a similar cock. He is looking for a companion for that cock. You take me in that cock-form to the King. He will surely want to purchase it from you. Ask a hundred *mohurs*. He will pay. Take the money after selling me and live on the money royally. I shall, however, rejoin you quickly."

"That is not a bad idea," replied the father.

Soon there stood near the place a hefty cock with lovely plumage. Nanda took it, fondled it and went to the palace. Reaching the palace, the cock raised a triumphant cry and the royal cock responded lustily. The King who was a keen poultrybreeder, listened to them both. He issued orders to locate the other cock. The royal messengers met Nanda and asked: "Sir, is this cock for sale?"

"Yes, but I don't think you can afford to buy it."

"It is not for me; it is for the King," came the reply.

"Then it is allright. I can't part with it for anything less than a hundred *mohurs*!"

The royal messengers ran back to report to the King, and the King immediately ordered the amount to be paid as price of the cock.

The King was immensely pleased with the new cock. Its majestic appearance captivated him. He put it under the care of the royal poultry-keeper with special instructions to see that it was well kept and not made to suffer any want.

Consequently the poultry-keeper kept the new cock in a safe place, shut up within an iron cage which could not be easily broken open and went to bed.

Early next morning the King asked for the new cock. When however, the keeper opened the door of the cage, he was stunned to find it empty. The cock was missing.

8. THE GURU'S CHANCE

When the royal poultry-keeper found to his dismay that the new cock was missing, his head reeled. "How shall I face the King?" worried he.

Calling some of his assistants, he soon made a systematic search of the enclosure which had been fully protected by wire-nets. Not finding any trace of the cock anywhere, the poultry-keeper at last lifted the iron cage in which the tell-tale cock had been kept when, to his astonishment, he found a deep hole burrowed through the ground beneath!

"Ha!" he exclaimed and after examining it further, said, "it is the work of a bandicoot which must have worked its way right up to the cock from the ground and carried it away!' This knowledge put him at some ease.

Yet with great misgivings he returned to the King who, already angered by the delay, seeing him return empty-handed, asked him sternly: "Where is the cock?"

"The cock has been stolen by a bandicoot, Sir!"

"What do you mean?" roared the King at the galling reply. "Would a bandicoot eat away a cock?" asked he.

"It is true, Sir!" wept the poultry-keeper trembling from head to foot, as his knees started knocking against each other in fear.

Unconvinced, the King held him by the neck and pushing him in the direction of the pen, drove him to the poultry shed. Already there was a small crowd of menials at that place who, on seeing the King necking the keeper, ducked behind for shelter.

"Where is the cage?" thundered the King.

Moaning loudly, the keeper took the King inside the enclosure and showed the cage and the yawning hole through which the cock had been spirited away by the bandicoot.

"I won't leave the bandicoot at that. Come here, all of you. Pull down the entire palace if you must, but get me the bandicoot that stole my prize-cock, will you? Or you will lose your heads!" said he, thumping his heels.

When the King turned his back on them, the servants who had taken shelter behind trees returned and all of them started digging the place. The digging operation continued for days together and a large chunk of the royal estate had been pulled down and yet the rascally bandicoot could not be traced.

As the King continued to receive day after day the same report that the bandicoot could not be traced and, as he saw before his eyes building after building being razed down for tracking down the wily creature, it dawned on him that his foolhardiness had been costing him heavily, and so he issued orders to stop demolition operation and start rebuilding. In course of time, the King clean forgot all about the prize-cock.

Even as the King's poultry-keeper discovered the disappearance of the new cock, the younger son of the ex-King Nanda stood before his father saluting.

Embracing him fondly the ex-King said: "My son! Do you know how I feared for you all the time? I nearly scolded myself for having bartered your life away for this paltry sum, for, who knows what the King will not do to you? To the father and mother, however poor, the child is not a thing to be weighed in terms of money. But now tell me," asked he, "how did you manage to come out?"

"That is easy, father," replied he. Continuing, he said: "When I found myself within a strong iron cage, I was nonplussed for some time. But finding that the bottom of the cage was made of wood, I took the form of a bandicoot and bored a hole through it and burrowed the earth beneath. It was small work to push my way into the earth and escape out of the palace precincts. But I pity the poor poultry-keeper who must now be having a very rough time with the King."

"I suppose so!" said the aged father.

The father and son then ate the first wholesome meal after a long time, prepared by the mother.

The three of them had a happy time of life for about a month when one day, the ex-King addressed his son:

"My son, the last of the hundred *mohurs* which you had earned for us has been spent. We shall have to revert to our old ways from tomorrow."

The son replied: "Father! Don't you worry. Did I not promise to you that I would never allow you to suffer want any more? I shall fetch you more money this time."

Father: "Son, in heaven's name, do not expose yourself to any danger for our sake. We can well carry on by alms."

Son: "Listen, father. There is a wealthy merchant in this city by name Dhanapala. He has a darling son who is a lover of horses and a good equestrian. I have seen him walking many a morning near the bund of the big tank.

Tomorrow I shall take the form of an Arab horse which you had better lead in front of him. He will most assuredly ask you to sell it to him. Ask for a thousand *mohurs* and he will make his father pay. Hand over the horse and take the money home and wait for me."

Father: "My son! What a wonderful boy you are! If no harm befalls you, I have no objection to do as you wish."

Just as planned, the aged ex-King led the majestic Arab horse which pranced restively and neighed. The young merchant-prince who was having his daily constitutional around the tank did not fail to notice this steed whose appearance fascinated him.

The merchant-prince asked of the man who held the horse: "Sir, can you sell this horse to me?"

"To you? Have you got the money to pay for it?" asked the old man.

"You know, I am the son of Dhanapala, the richest merchant of this city. If you follow me with this horse, I shall arrange for its payment," replied the young man.

"But will your father pay a thousand *mohurs*?" asked the old man again.

"Of course, come and see," replied the other confidently.

The two of them thereupon proceeded to Dhanapala's house on foot, followed by the horse.

Dhanapala too who saw the horse was greatly impressed by its look and carriage and although a hard paymaster, did not press for any reduction in price as apparently he felt the price asked for was rather moderate.

So, he counted the thousand *mohurs* which he handed over to the ex-King, who departed leaving the horse behind.

When you make a good buy, you can't help showing it to your friends; it is but one of the forms of human weakness to earn praise. With the rich, in particular, it is a positive trait which must be suffered with indulgence.

So, merchant Dhanapala more than others eagerly waited for the man who would appreciate his latest buy, his son's instructor. When therefore the latter came later that day, Dhanapala proudly produced the horse and asked: "What do you think of this purchase, master?"

It so happened that this instructor was no other than the same Brahmin under whom ex-King Nanda's sons had studied and whom the younger son had outwitted, at any rate for the time being, but who, guessing as to who had played that trick on him, had waited for a suitable opportunity to wreak vengeance upon his clever pupil.

When the *guru* therefore touched the horse that was displayed before him, he appeared to admire it; but in reality he had discovered the person hiding inside the Arab horse and therefore he smiled within himself that the ex-pupil who had outwitted him had fallen into his hands like a ripe cucumber.

He decided to wreak vengeance upon the young boy in horse form.

9. THE CHELA GIVES THE SLIP

WITH that resolve, the Brahmin tutor addressed Dhanapala: "O, merchant, I have something in my mind which I try to withhold but in vain. Have I not eaten your salt all these years?"

"Do tell me, Sir, for I am sure you will always mean well by me!" said the merchant.

"Listen, then," started the tutor. "If I know anything of the science of horses, there can be no two opinions about the high quality of this horse, but I have my fears that it may prove too unmanageable to your son".

"But," butted in the merchant, "you have always testified to my son's excellent horsemanship."

"True; but that applies only to normal horses. This one has the power of flying in the air and even reaching up to heaven. You will now understand that it is a potential danger to the life of your son".

"Is that so? I never knew. But are you sure of what you say about the horse?" asked the merchant sceptically who knew all the ways of merchandise inside and out.

The tutor who could look through the merchant's doubt replied: "Look, I shall demonstrate the power of the horse and after witnessing it, you can decide things for yourself".

So saying, the tutor saddled the horse and jumped on it gracefully. One crack of the whip was sufficient to make the horse soar effortlessly into the sky and not till the horse and its rider landed did the merchant really believe that they would ever return.

Dhanapala was the richest merchant of the city and he had an only son. When wealth and affection join hands reason will become the scapegoat. No wonder the merchant felt grateful to the tutor for pulling him out of an awful situation. Only he wished he had consulted the tutor before the purchase. One thing Dhanapala had decided was that his son should have no truck with the horse.

The easiest way to get rid of the horse under the circumstances would of course be to make a gift of it to the tutor who showed himself capable of controlling it. But there was the money part of it which was no mean figure. The human mind is so ingenious that in self-interest it will conveniently overlook the obvious or logical and put on, for the time being a cloak of indifference to vital issues.. Our merchant went further than that and decided to palm off his doubtful buy to less fortunate hands, if possible at a premium.

The *guru,* however, was more than a match for the merchant in more than one respect. He had not mastered the *sastras* for nothing. He could easily read through the mental working of Dhanapala to whom therefore he put this proposition: "Dhanapala, you now see how dangerous is this horse to your son. Anyway, you have paid the money. Do not worry. I shall pay you back that money and. you can sell the horse to me. You know I can take care of it".

This offer was a windfall to Dhanapala who had also subconsciously reckoned with a loss and therefore immediately closed the deal by formally handing over the beast to the *guru.*

"Send your son along with me to my home and I shall pay him the money," said the *guru* who wanted to dispel the merchant's lurking doubt about the genuineness of the proposal.

The merchant's son who had all along been a shadowy witness to all that happened between his father and his *guru* now followed the latter at his father's behest and collected the money all right.

Man becomes a savage when he succumbs to anger or revenge or lust. All his better nature take leave of him for the nonce and he rides a high horse, ignoring others' feeling; the *guru* became a fiend when he got possession of the horse, his once-pupil whose only crime had been to outwit him and rightly too, which dealt a crack to the *guru's* self-esteem.

The *guru* tied the horse to a pillar and flogged it to his heart's content and rode it for hours on end without giving it either food or water. When it was on the point of dying out of thirst, he took it to an almost dry pond where water was at its shallowest and muddiest.

The boy in horse-form had by now concluded that the *guru* was out to kill him and had waited for an opportunity to escape from his grip. It was impossible to do so in horse-form in view of the master's consummate skill in riding. His chance came when he was led to the pond.

Calling to aid one of the *vidyas* he learnt from the same *guru,* the ex-pupil suddenly entered into the body of a dead fish in the pond and vanished under water when the horse which the *guru* was seated on, fell down dead.

For a second the *guru* feared the horse had died too soon; but his second thoughts made him exercise his higher sense of perception by which he discovered the truth and gnashed his teeth, for, it was impossible to pick out his pupil-fish from the rest.

Not allowing himself to be brow-beaten thus, the *guru* called all the boys in his school and asked them to dry up the entire pond by means of buckets and kill all the fishes. Finding that his game was up, the ex-pupil thought of other means to escape.

At that time a street scavenger came there dragging a dead buffalo and leaving it at the bank of the pond, went to bring his chopper for cutting the horns and skin away. Finding it an excellent opportunity, the ex-pupil left the fish body and entered the dead buffalo which started romping home.

When the scavenger returned, he was astonished to find the dead buffalo missing and so asked the *guru* who was supervising the drying-up operation at the pond: "Sir, did you see any one lifting away a dead buffalo which I left here a few minutes ago?"

This put the *guru* on the alert and by means of his superior powers, he discovered that his ex-pupil had decamped in the buffalo-form. Soon he set his army of pupils in pursuit of the buffalo which was found panting beneath a tree not far off. On spotting it, the *guru* ordered the scavenger to tie it up and beat it to death.

Not finding the end of his ordeals, the ex-pupil looked up at the sky and noticed a dead parrot in a nest at the top of the tree. So he jumped into the body of the parrot, leaving the body of the buffalo which fell down dead.

Once bitten is twice shy. So the *guru* would not take the buffalo really dead. So again exercising his higher perception, he found his ex-pupil hiding inside the parrot's body. Not to be outdone, the *guru* took the form of a *garuda* and persecuted the parrot which flew for life.

Crossing forests and hills in its escape-flight the parrot came to a city and looked for a safe hiding. When it flew round about the King's palace, it saw the windows of a balcony open, inside which the Princess of the State was seated on a sofa drying her hair. Deciding that there could be no better asylum, the parrot entered the balcony and fell on the Princess's lap.

The *garuda* who had given hot chase to the parrot could not enter the palace for obvious reasons, but perching on the window-sill screeched in bird language at the parrot: 'You are trying out the lessons you learnt from me against my own self! Do not think you have scored over me. I shall not leave you alive for more than eight days.

The parrot replied: "Go to hell!"

Not understanding this wordy duel, the Princess fondled the parrot.

10. PARROT AND THE PRINCESS

IN the Indian tradition the offering of an asylum was mandatory for kings, no matter what the antecedents of the seeker may be. In a small way, therefore, the parrot too enjoyed that privilege. But its lovely plumage, shapely figure and the spectrum of its colours were such that the Princess became enamoured of the bird and there arose in her a natural pity for it in its predicament and also a feeling of pride that she could save the parrot from sure death.

The Princess in the first flush of enthusiasm fed the parrot to surfeit with all that its kind would take. Its intelligent face and comprehending look fascinated her. She immediately ordered for it a golden cage inlaid with costly gems which was brought before nightfall. "A royal cage for a royal parrot!" exclaimed she as she proudly sent the parrot into the cage. The long and short of it was that the Princess took the parrot as a God-given gift and considered it a good augury.

At night, before retiring to bed, the Princess again fondled the parrot and fed it to her heart's content and leaving it inside the cage which hung by her bedside, lowered the lights, and went to bed.

To the young Prince who had taken the parrot-form, the environment he found himself in was intoxicating, but his innate culture and attainments kept him within bounds. But he was not there to be fondled for ever by the Princess.

His preceptor, now his inveterate foe, had vowed to kill him within eight days; and unless he, the Prince, took the Princess into partnership, his chances of escape would be slender. On one thing however, he had made up his mind; he would marry that Princess. The question was how best to do it. If he went about it awkwardly by announcing himself straightway, he would most certainly frighten the girl and lose his chance, not to speak of further endangering his life. He therefore decided to go slow and subtly.

When it was past midnight, the steady breathing of the Princess assured him that she was fast asleep. Without making any noise, he came out of the cage and assuming his human form, sat on her couch without disturbing her, helped himself liberally to the fruits and other eatables, ate *tambul,* wore the flowers, smeared the unguents on himself, and short of touching the Princess, disarrayed her robes so as to give it all an incriminating look and crept back into the cage in parrot-form.

The cool morning breeze woke up the Princess and when she sat up, she had the shock of her life on seeing the state of her night-robes and things round her all in disarray. Anyone who saw the place would swear that a man had visited her. "But how is that possible?" wondered she, thinking of the iron protection clamped around her as the unmarried daughter of the Chief of State.

The Princess did not belong to that category of women who turn hysterical at the first mention of an abnormal happening. Nor was she of the other extreme type to take fiendish delight in being 'progressive.' Being essentially cool and collected by temperament, she decided to catch the miscreant herself, for she was sure of one, but who, she guessed, was nevertheless a flunky.

Without making any fuss whatsoever she tidied up the room herself and before her attendants came, she had made the room spick and span. Like a child who wakes up full of thoughts of the new doll bought for it she went up to the parrot in the cage the first thing, took it out with infinite love, kissed it, fondled it and fed it with fruits and milk and went out of the room to return soon.

The Prince who was in parrot-form watched to his satisfaction that so far he had not given himself away, not at any rate rudely, from the manner in which the Princess behaved. He therefore decided to pursue his plan till the time was ripe.

The Princess on the other hand appeared unconcerned with what had happened to her the previous night, for throughout the day she was her usual self. She had however cleverly ascertained from her aides that the cordon thrown around her had not relaxed nor that the King had any intention of doing so in the near future.

When night set in, the Princess did not go to sleep at the usual hour and kept awake by reading. This put the prince-parrot into two minds—whether to present himself to her or duck. But the Princess soon solved the problem for him, for, fatigue overcame her resolution and by midnight she had fallen asleep, whereupon the Prince repeated the performances of the previous night and slid into the cage with impunity.

The Princess, when she woke up the next morning, bit her lips for having allowed herself to be fooled for the second time. She was now certain of one thing: whoever was responsible for this dirty trick was no mean person inasmuch as he could cross all the hurdles which the might of a king could impose and he must surely be interesting. She would not suffer this indignity for the third time, she resolved.

Again, cool as cucumber, she put her room in order and went about unconcerned. As usual, she patted and chatted with the parrot, fed it, bathed it and spent time on it, forgetting the creeps she had started getting by then. However, she took care to steal a nap during the afternoon so as better to keep the night vigil; for she was determined to pin the sniper.

That night she would not be charmed by the universal charmer—sleep. The midnight hour found her poring on a book, but soon she lay down on her couch and spread a thin muslin over her entire figure feigning sleep. The parrot could see her open eyelids under which sparkled her vigilant eyes like stars in the autumnal sky.

Finding that he could not indulge in his pranks that night, the Prince in the parrot-form felt a little disappointed. But soon he realised: "Already three precious days have elapsed and only five more remain before which the *guru* has vowed to kill me. It is useless to play hide and seek any more, and unless I take the Princess into my confidence I cannot outwit my *guru!*"

With this thought, the Prince came out of the cage and assuming his human form, deliberately sat on the couch where the Princess was shaming Abraham. No sooner had he touched her than she sprang from the bed and holding him by the hand, asked him sternly: "Who are you? Why do you stay in my bed-chamber as a parrot? Unless you tell me the truth, I shall hand you over to the police."

"Princess! Excuse me for my unceremonious intrusion into your privacy. I was forced to do so by circumstances. If you listen to me for a few minutes you will yourself agree that I am far from being guilty," replied the Prince and narrated to her briefly his story from the time of his birth as second son of King Dharma Nanda of Dharmapuri, how his entire family was driven out of his country, how after the period of his education his perceptor had been conducting a war of wits against him.

The Princess who had already sized him up as the man she had been waiting for drew up a deep breath at the conclusion of the narration and asked: "You mean to say that the *garuda* which chased you up to my room was in reality your preceptor?"

"Yes, Princess, and I am sad to say that he has vowed to kill me within five days from today."

"O! Don't tell me you are going to be intimidated by that threat?"

"No, not that, since I have received your protection," replied the young Prince in a doubtful voice smilingly.

"Don't be naughty; you can well look after yourself," replied she blushing with embarrassment.

"No, forsooth; I need your help badly," pleaded the Prince.

"Please tell me, you know I shall always be willing to help you."

"I am so happy to hear that and shall be grateful to you for ever. Now please listen. With my special powers I have foreseen the moves of my adversary and my erstwhile teacher. On the fifth day from now, my preceptor will come to your father with his paraphernalia as a street juggler and exhibit his powers. Towards the end, poising himself on the top of a seventy-foot pole he will ask for the parrot *you* keep—i.e. me—as a present from your father who in turn will ask it of you. Without the least compunction you must wrench my neck i.e. the parrot's and throw it down. Have no fears at all about me. Finding the parrot dead he will next ask for the pearl necklace you are wearing as his present. Remove it, but snap the chord of the necklace when the pearls will roll down on the floor and watch for further developments. This is all that I ask of you."

When the Princess heard these instructions, her admiration for him became evident. Indeed it became clear that they understood the regard each cherished for the other so well that they instantly decided to become man and wife. Thenceforward the Prince remained in the cage only during day or when people were about.

11. THE HAPPY TRUCE

THERE is a particular charm in secrecy hardly to be attained elsewhere. It is all the greater when it is surrounded by mystery and adventure. If therefore the parrot and the Princess spent the rest of the five days almost giddily, giggling at the back of the whole world, it was forgivable.

The fateful eighth day dawned and with it the drumbeat of the street juggler before the palace deafened the ears of the princely lovers who had been looking forward to it with an amount of trepidation.

When the chief among the jugglers started his performances in the immediate presence of the King, there was a regular stampede for places of vantage before the palace. People had gathered in their thousands and were straining their necks not to miss a single feat which came one after the other in a tantalizing manner. The entire concourse as one man praised the maestro as the undisputed master of the art. The King beamed with satisfaction.

Towards the end, the chief juggler climbed up a 70-foot pole and dangling from the top made a dainty bow to the King and asked for his reward.

Said the King: "Name your reward and you shall have it."

"I know you will grant me anything, Lord! But God has given me enough money. But I would like to have as my reward the parrot which the Princess keeps. That will satisfy me," replied the wily juggler.

"Well, you will have it," replied the King and sent the servants to bring the parrot.

The King's command was conveyed to the Princess who became visibly annoyed, and replied: "Fools that you are! How dare you ask me of my pet? Haven't you other parrots? Go and get any number and give them to my father."

The maids-in-waiting duly conveyed her message to the King at which the King became angry: "When I promise a thing, I shall not go back on it. Tell my daughter to hand over her parrot and I shall give her hundreds of them."

When the servants came to her again with the King's order, the Princess became angry and without a flicker of the eye-lid wrenched the head of the parrot and throwing it down, said: "Now, take it this way if you please."

The dead parrot was nevertheless placed at the foot of the pole wherefrom the juggler was floating and flitting animatedly. On seeing the dead parrot, the juggler said: "Mighty King! I wanted the live bird; but now that it is dead, present me with the pearl necklace which your daughter wears."

The King looked back at his officials and they ran up to the Princess and asked for her pearl necklace. The Princess finding the events happening precisely as her lover had predicted, said out of sheer ennui: "Evidently my father does not like me to wear this necklace. I would rather break it."

Saying so, she removed it from her neck and breaking the thread, threw it on the floor, when, lo! the pearls which rolled on the floor all became vermins and started moving in all directions!

All the time, the juggler who was floating from the top of the pole was watching all that was happening in the Princess's room. As soon as the pearls from the necklace started creeping on the floor as vermins, the juggler left his human body and taking the shape of a cock, flew into the room and began eating those vermin. While the dazed Princess and her attendants stood looking on at the strange things happening there, from nowhere appeared a ferocious cat which pounced upon the cock and held it in mortal grip. After a fierce struggle the exhausted cock exclaimed in human voice, "Congratulations, my young boy! You have succeeded in overpowering me. I am proud of you. I shall bear no enmity towards you henceforth. Leave me now."

By this time the King, followed by his courtiers, had climbed up the stairs and walked into the Princess's apartment, where they were led by apprehensive attendants.

At the time the King arrived, the cock was in the mortal grip of the cat which roared in human voice: "I shall not leave you for all the ills you have done me and my parents all these years. I don't believe you at all."

At this the King intervened and pulling the cock away, asked it: "Who are you and why do you fight thus?"

"Ask the cat, and it will tell you all," replied the cock demurely.

The King asked the cat which was panting.

To the astonishment of all those assembled, the cat who was the Prince and pupil, related his story: his birth as the second son of King Dharma Nanda, how he was exiled, how he underwent tuition under the care of the *guru* who was the cock, and how their enmity grew.

The King and courtiers were spellbound by this amazing story and as the Prince finished his narration, the King asked the *guru:* "Now that both of you have met face to face, what is your future plan of action?"

The *guru* replied: "I have already conceded my palm to my *chela* who has clearly defeated me and thus has vindicated himself as superior to his own master. I am proud of him. I have no more ill-will. I want to be on very friendly terms with him. This is my honest intention."

"What have you to say, Prince?" asked the King of the cat-prince.

"I have no objection to be on peaceful terms with my *guru*. I do not fear him anyway," replied he.

Both the *guru* and his *chela* assumed their real forms and shook hands with each other in the presence of the King.

The King entertained both of them with a feast in the course of which he taught the *guru* some hometruths.

Turning to the Prince he said: "You have kept the company of my daughter all these eight days as a parrot and in that form you have won her heart. I am sure she will not agree to part from you after knowing who you are. If you have no objection, I would like you to marry my daughter."

The Prince kept silent which showed consent whereupon the King sent for the state astrologer to fix a day and hour for the wedding. The marriage came off with great eclat. The *guru* presided over the function.

At the conclusion of the marriage, the *guru* requested the King: "King! I want your permission to take my son-disciple and his wife to my place. I want to play host to them for some days."

The King looked at the Prince who showed no unwillingness, whereupon the King sent him and his daughter along with the *guru*. At that time he gave away a large force as retinue, clothes, jewels, horses, etc., as gifts to his son-in-law.

Completely forgetting his animosity, the *guru* treated his *chela* as his own son, and after entertaining them for a few days, sent them away. At that time, the *guru* handed over the elder Prince whom he had kept back as his *dakshina* and whom he had made his servant, to the younger Prince who embraced him.

The three of them thereupon proceeded towards Dharmapuri, the lost capital, followed by the retinue which consisted of a regular army. The usurper thinking that the old King was invading to recapture his kingdom, surrendered being totally unprepared. Thus the Prince virtually won the lost country by invitation.

Occupying it, he sent for his aged parents who returned soon. On seeing their former King, the people wept with joy. The younger Prince thereupon reinstalled his father on the throne. He also made arrangements for the speedy education of his elder brother and had him married to a Princess. Thus, after the reunion, the family lived happily.

Readers will remember that Chaturya was relating this story to the Princess of Bhimapuri in the nuptial chamber.

Chaturya said in the end: “Princess, if at all you must have a husband, you must have one like the younger son of Dharma-Nanda. Don’t you think so?”

As he said so, the white streaks of sun’s rays entered the nuptial chamber whereupon Chaturya said: “Lady! It is day now. You had better move off now to attend to your morning duties.”

12. PRINCE WHO BOUGHT A CAT

ON the following day Chaturya spent his time uneasily, although the palace continued to wear the festive appearance.

In order not to give himself away, he put on his best face, chatted and cracked jokes with those who accosted him and when night set in, dressed himself appropriately and entered the bridal chamber and, as on the previous night, feigned sleep on the luxurious couch.

It was the turn of the younger Princess that night. So, she dressed herself enchantingly and entered the chamber noiselessly.

In the dim light of that chamber which was filled with exotic perfume, she looked like an *apsaras* descended from heaven to meet her lover. Chaturya who could not help looking at her from the corner of his eyes felt for a moment if he was not making a fool of himself in the environment which was too tempting even for gods.

But his sense of mission served to put things before him directly in the right perspective. He removed the cover from his face and started snoring.

The young Princess who had little or no knowledge of the deep game that Chaturya was playing nor indeed of what had happened the previous night to her sister, was in excellent spirit and her bosom heaved proudly as she looked forward to meet her wedded lover..

One look in the direction of her husband revealed that he was there already, relaxing perhaps as she thought. She daintily placed the platter of delicacies and the cup of concentrated milk boiled with saffron which she had brought on a stand and walking like a doe reached the rim of his couch on which she sat ever so lightly, hoping perhaps to be tucked in by her lover. But nothing of the kind happened. She waited another minute and still nothing happened. The measured breathing of her husband did not indicate any change in the atmosphere. A frown started gathering on her face which only gave edge to her beauty—but who was there to appreciate it? Her husband was too tired perhaps to notice her, she consoled herself.

So, with a broad smile she tiptoed away from the couch and taking hold of the *Veena* which came handy, sat cross-legged on the floor and raised a melodious tune on it with her chiselled fingers which would leave no doubt about her condition on its hearer. Still there was no response.

There are limits to the endurance even of wives. When the melody too failed to evoke any response, she laid the instrument aside with a certain abruptness and as a last resort did the fingerclap—the lover's call—deciding to cast him away as a dud if he failed. But luckily Chaturya jumped from his bed at this, when the Princess's face beamed in smiles.

Exclaimed she: "My lord does not appear to have overcome the fatigue!"

"No, the best of women! Don't you know of the proverbial fatigue of the newly wed?" replied Chaturya and both of them laughed.

"I have a remedy for it. Please try it," said she placing before him the platter of delicacies and the medicated milk.

Chaturya took some of them, accepted *tambul* and spoke banteringly, after which the Princess entertained him with music.

As the hours of the night shrank, the tempo of her love rose, at which Chaturya became alarmed and decided to employ the same recipe that he had used in the case of her elder sister on the previous night.

Asked he: "Why are you in such frightful haste, love? Nobody can steal the water away from the well. Let us talk for some more time. Do you like stories?"

The Princess who was at first dejected, sat up with a jerk at the mention of the word 'story.' Who has fully overgrown his childhood, at any rate in the matter of listening to stories? Not the young Princess, to be sure.

Chaturya narrated to her the following story which was cunningly chosen in view of her age:

King Alakesa of Alakapuri got a son after a long time. I do not know if the birth of children has generally any influence on their parents; but in the case of Alakesa, it did have and woefully too. Three years after the child was born, King Alakesa died. The boy and his mother came under the protection of Alakesa's brother who, starting as a regent, gradually usurped the throne and drove the young Prince and his mother away from the palace.

For a time the mother and son lived on charity. Deciding to fend for her son's future, the mother went to her parent's place leaving her son behind, mainly with a view to raising some capital for him to trade with. She did succeed in borrowing a hundred *mohurs* from them which she brought and gave the Prince. Then she said:

"My son! It does not become us to live on the charity of others. Sooner or later they will get fed up and we will be in the streets and people will laugh at us. We must create our own means of living. Here are a hundred *mohurs*. Invest them in some trade or business and try to build it up, and from the income we can lead an honourable life."

"Yes, Ma! I shall start on it today itself," said the Young Prince who, taking the money in his hands, started on a journey to a neighbouring place to buy goods for selling.

The ex-Prince had to walk the distance to that place along an outlandish route. While halfway through, he saw a villager carrying a gunny bag on his head coming from the opposite direction.

That villager was living in a cottage by the wayside. He had a large family but was of poor means. His home consisted, besides his children, of a litter of kittens which not merely deprived his own kids of their share of milk but were a positive nuisance.

Deciding to get rid of them all, he had tied them up in a gunny bag and was carrying it to let them out at a far off place lest they should nose their way back home later.

Now it was this gunny bag on the villager's head which caught the attention of our young ex-Prince.

Stopping the villager, the Prince asked: "Sir! What is it you carry in that bag?"

Villager: "They are kittens."

Ex-Prince: "Are they for sale?"

The villager was a shrewd person. When he heard the foolish question, he decided that the youngster was a simpleton. Trying to make fun of him, he replied: "Yes, Sir! They are for sale. Each kitten costs five hundred *mohurs*."

Ex-Prince: "Please, for my sake won't you give me for a hundred *mohurs,* for I have only that much."

The villager really pitied the naivete of the youngster. Mockingly he replied: "Yes, for your sake I shall give them to you. Where is the money?"

The ex-Prince produced the *mohurs* from the bag under his armpit—all that his mother had placed at his disposal to start the business.

The sight of gold has alchemic properties. It can change a saint into a savage. How can a poor villager resist its power? When what started as a joke became a reality, the villager's honesty lost its vintage and he became a robber.

He coolly pocketed the hundred *mohurs* and placed the gunny bag on the ground.

The ex-Prince who was in the flush of excitement in making the first purchase for his business, opened the bag when, lo! all the kittens but one scampered for safety, unceremoniously scratching his hands in the bargain.

All the while the villager was surveying the ex-Prince from head to foot.

"Well, Sir," said the latter, "only one kitten remains and I have paid for them all. Haven't I?"

"No, Sir," replied the villager with a twinkle in his eye, "you will remember I asked for 500 *mohurs* for each kitten, but later agreed to reduce the price to a 100 in view of your candidness. You will thus realise that the bargain is only for one kitten."

The ex-Prince thought the other man must be right and holding his merchandise of one kitten in his hand, walked home in a jubilant mood.

The villager thanked his stars for relieving him of his poverty at a crucial moment and prayed for more such opportunities.

The ex-Prince came home after a brisk walk and as a dutiful son sought his mother and placed at her feet the kitten he had bought and prostrated.

"What is this, son?" asked the confounded lady.

"I have bought this kitten for my business," said he.

"What? Where is the money I gave you?" asked she.

"I bought this kitten for that money."

"My God!" screamed the lady and holding her reeling head in her hand, slumped on the floor.

13. THE BEGGAR PRINCE BECOMES A MONARCH

THE lot of a poor widowed mother with an imbecile son is pitiable beyond words. All her hopes and joys are centred in him and all that she expects of him is only support to her in her old age. For that she is willing to forego her meal and grind her body to sandal pulp. But if after doing all she can for him, she finds him disappointing, the agony of her heart has no parallel. Even God cannot fail to be profoundly disturbed.

The ex-Queen had thought, her evil days were coming to an end at last but when she saw her son return with a kitten after paying a hundred gold *mohurs* for it, she was rudely shaken. When she recovered her consciousness, her son was still standing by her side holding his precious purchase.

Had it been for any other person in the place of a mother, the picture would have been different. The boy would be howling and the neighbours would find it hard put to suppress their mirth. Very few would commiserate.

But the mother is made of different stuff. The Queen's disappointment was but momentary. Hope revived in her and leaving her son behind, she set out again on a journey to her parents' place to seek further aid in an effort to set her son on his legs.

While she was away, the ex-Prince lived by begging. Livelihood was now for two lives—himself and the kitten. Partly out of pity and partly out of mirth, people obliged him by sparing a little food.

The ex-Queen soon returned with a further hundred *mohurs* which she placed in the hands of her son and said: "My child! Do not worry about the past. But now you must be wise, and must not allow yourself to be duped. Here are a hundred *mohurs*. Take them. Go to the market and purchase goods and bring them home. By selling them we can make a profit with which we can live. Remember, this is your second chance and you may not have another. If you fail this time too, we are doomed. Be careful."

Although the ex-Prince understood that his mother disapproved of his previous purchase, he at the same time did not know what constituted a good bargain. Without any fixed objective, therefore, he again proceeded along the road which led to the market-town and which merchants often took.

On the way, a snake-charmer was coming from the opposite direction. On his head he carried a bamboo basket which contained the snakes he had caught and tamed.

Among the snakes he carried was a son of the great serpent king Vasuki, Nagendra by name. Vasuki Junior had come out from Patala-loka for sight-seeing. Accidentally this snake-charmer saw him and threw a spell on him and caught him, of course without knowing his identity.

Now, this bamboo-basket attracted the attention of our ex-Prince who asked the charmer: "Hey! What is it that you carry on your head? Any merchandise?"

"No, no!" replied the charmer. Forming a fair opinion of his questioner, he continued: "This contains cobras. If I display them before the King, he will buy them at five hundred *mohurs* each!"

The ex-Prince immediately saw his opportunity and asked: "If that is so, give me a cobra, I have a hundred *mohurs* with me."

The snake-charmer chuckled within himself: "I must have set out today at an auspicious hour and I should not let this opportunity slip by."

Thinking thus, he replied: "But Saheb! these cost me five hundred *mohurs* and how can I sell at a hundred?"

"I have only a hundred *mohurs* with me, and if you are willing, you may sell me one," replied the young ex-Prince.

The charmer feigned unwillingness. Ultimately he gave away one from his collection which happened to be Vasuki Junior, and received the hundred *mohurs*.

Greatly overjoyed by his performance in buying a commodity at a fifth of its cost, the young boy flaunted it across his chest—the cobra was spellbound and so it could not harm him—and hurried home.

The Queen-mother who had been anxiously waiting for her darling son to return, could not believe her eyes when he did, proudly displaying his purchase from a distance. But when he came nearer she fell down shrieking at the sight of the ferocious-looking cobra.

Before she could open her mouth, the Prince said: "Mother, I got this for a fifth of its cost. He wanted five hundred *mohurs* but I gave only one hundred. It is a very good bargain!"

The Queen-mother first ascertained that her son was safe with the reptile and then quietly went inside blaming her own destiny in having given her an utterly worthless son. Deciding it was useless to expect him to reform much less to support her, she left him to his fate once again and returned to her parents.

After her departure, people of the place commiserated on the poor Prince and gave him liberal alms so that he could support himself, his cat and the cobra.

However much she had despaired, the Queen-mother could not help returning to her son. When she did so after some time, she advised him: "Son, you were born to a mighty monarch but have the misfortune to beg of your own people for your living. But couldn't you be intelligent enough to work your way? I have none but my fate to blame. Now look, if you keep reptiles for your companions, who will become friendly with you? Listen to me: leave the cobra back at the place where you bought it, please, for my sake!"

The young Prince agreed and taking the basket containing the cobra, went to the forest and at the time of releasing it said: "O, cobra! We have been such fast friends these days. Much as I would like to keep you, my mother disapproves of it. Please therefore forgive me and go your own way henceforth." Then he walked back.

But Vasuki Junior was greatly touched by the warmth and sincerity of the Prince. Deciding to repay his debt of gratitude to the Prince, he called the Prince by his name. The Prince who had never heard a snake speak, came back and stood before the snake which continued: "I have never seen a more kind and sincere person than you. In leaving me here, you are only obeying your mother's command; and I am feeling very pleased. I want to do you a good turn for protecting me all these days. Know me to be Vasuki's son Nagendra. My father would by now have been greatly worried about me, not having returned yet. I shall presently go to him. He will be pleased to see me. I shall tell him all about you. He will send a palanquin made of pearls to carry you thither. Ride on it and come to Naga-loka. My father will entertain you and offer to give you anything you like. Tell him you have enough but ask him to give the ring of *jeeva-ratna* he wears. He will give it. Take it and go home. With its aid you can get anything you think of. It will take you anywhere you want to go. Do you hear?"

The Prince agreed and waited at the place till the palanquin arrived and when it did, he rode on it and reached Naga-loka. Vasuki was all solicitude for the Prince in whose honour he threw a huge party which all the nobles of his country attended. Music and dance went on for days together.

At the end of the visit, when the Prince desired to depart, Vasuki said: "Noble Sir, you have been a father to my son all these days. What would have happened to him but for you, I shudder to think. Now I want to give you all or anything you would like to accept from me. Please say what you would like to have."

The Prince said: "By God's grace, I have enough to live upon. Since you compel me, you may give me the ring of *jeeva-ratna* you wear."

Vasuki immediately took out the ring and giving it to the Prince said: "It is the greatest gift I can give. It has divine powers and it is a veritable Kamadhenu. It will give you anything you think of. Even Devendra hasn't got it. You are lucky. Keep it safe. I bless you. You will become great." He then sent the Prince away on a palanquin with a suitable retinue.

Emissaries of Naga-loka left him at the boundary of their country after which the Prince walked on foot. On the way, he wanted to test the efficacy of the ring he had just received and so, after praying to Siva as directed, he thought: "Let this forest be burnt out!"

No sooner had he willed than the entire forest, barring the place he was standing on was burnt to ashes.

Satisfied as to the ring's potency, the Prince again willed: "At this place may a mighty Capital City arise, with palaces, storied buildings, temples, shops, etc."

Even so, rose the Capital which had no parallel. He named the city Nishadhapuri.

Next he willed: "May all the people of my father's Capital, my cat and my mother come and settle here!" The wish was fulfilled instantaneously.

The Queen-mother called him one day and asked him: "Son, how did you manage to accomplish all these things, which are nothing short of a miracle?" The Prince told her all about the magic ring at which she rejoiced.

He coronated himself as King of Nishadhapuri and calling the people who had helped him in his poverty, rewarded them all liberally and started ruling over the State as a *dharmic* King.

One day the young King lay enjoying the cool breeze of the palace-garden. The full moon shone in mild splendour. The spring season made the birds chirp hilariously. Naturally, the Prince's thoughts turned romantic. "Who is best suited to marry me?" he thought.

With the help of the magic ring, he scanned the world and found that the Princess of Swarnapuri was the most beautiful girl. Thereupon he willed that the Princess be brought to him forthwith and she was brought along with her couch on which she slept.

Overcome by passion on seeing her, the King tried to embrace her when the Princess Swarnakumari said: "Sir, tarry a little. I am bound to marry a King at all events and whom can I think of more than your good self who could fly me down to your feet at will? I do not think it will be difficult for you to marry me openly. So, kindly send me back to my home and send word to my father asking for my hand. For my part, I shall persuade my parents to agree to the proposal."

The King of Nishadhapuri who had by now recovered from his momentary infirmity, saw reason in what the Princess said and accordingly sent her back to her palace.

Early in the morning Princess Swarnakumari sought her parents and said: "I did not agree to marry so far, because I could not get a suitable husband for me. Now I have found one." And she blushed.

The Queen of Swarnapuri who had been looking forward to this announcement embraced her daughter and seating her on her lap, encouraged her: "I am so happy to hear this. Tell us who that lucky young man is, and we shall ask him to marry you."

The Princess replied: "There is a city by name Nishadhapuri, a hundred miles from here. The King of that country is not only handsome, but truthful and of immense powers. He is devoted to his mother and loves his people as his children."

"Yes, yes, I have heard of him," said the King. "I shall soon send our envoy to that King to arrange the marriage."

In the meantime the King of Nishadha called his Council of Ministers early next morning and announced: "I have set my heart on the Princess of Swarnapuri. Please therefore make proper approaches to the King and arrange the marriage."

The Ministers who had been looking forward to the event, felt very happy at the tidings and immediately sent a competent deputation to Swarnapuri to negotiate the marriage.

It was therefore with not a little surprise that the King of Swarnapuri received the emissaries of Nishadha on the following day. On hearing the proposal, he said: "Nothing delights us more; but let us consult our daughter and let you have the reply. In the meantime please be seated."

Entering his daughter's apartment the King told her: "You are lucky indeed, my child! The very King of whom you told us has sent messengers asking for your hand for their King. Shall I agree to the proposal and fix the date?"

Colour flowed to the cheeks of the Princess as she bashfully bowed in acceptance. The King twitched her cheek in mirth and returned to the durbar, all smiles, and announced consent.

14. THE MAGIC RING PASSES HANDS

No sooner did the royal emissaries return to Nishadhapuri carrying the happy message than did the King of Nishadha start to Swarnapuri for the marriage followed by a proper retinue. The Queen-mother and the faithful cat formed part of the wedding party.

King Swarneswara received the bridegroom's people properly and gave his daughter in marriage on an auspicious day in *sastraic* manner. A palace wedding may now be a rarity but in the ancient days, they were common and the entire city participated in the celebrations. Indeed it was enjoyed for days together like a festival. Swarneswara gave away as dowry to the bridegroom a large contingent of the four-fold forces besides jewels, clothes and other valuables. At the conclusion of the marriage festival, Swarneswara bade his daughter and son-in-law adieu with tear-laden eyes.

Upon the return of the party to Nishadha, the people of that country celebrated the event again as their own for several days. Thus for days together the King of Nishadha continued to enjoy a festive time.

Soon after, one day Swarnakumari asked her husband: "Lord, it is my first duty every day to worship at the feet of your mother and for that purpose I have to bathe before sunrise. As it is a bit risky to walk in public in the early hours, may I request my lord to build a tunnel for me from our bedroom to the swimming pool at the beach so that I can go by that path unseen?"

The King of Nishadha, as we know, had no need of engineers or artisans. With the aid of his magic ring presented by Vasuki, he willed: "Let there be a tunnel in the manner my Queen desires!" Instantly there came to be one. Swarnakumari started using that tunnel from that very day. Every day she took her bath in the sea before dawn unseen by anybody and only after worshipping at the feet of her mother-in-law and husband did she set about doing any other work.

One day a King of Cochin in the course of a hunt happened to pass by the beach where Swarnakumari used to bathe. As he walked, a blade of human hair happened to entangle itself on his toe. When he tried to remove it, he was struck by the hair's softness and other qualities. A great connoisseur that he was, it was not difficult for him to discover that it belonged to a woman of royal birth. Truth was, it had streamed away from Swaranakumari when she had combed her hair.

After examining the hair, the King of Cochin reflected: "I have not seen a specimen of hair so lovely, so silky, so aromatic, and so divine. Its rare softness makes me wonder what celestial beauty its owner must be. What is life worth if I cannot have that woman for myself?"

Abandoning the hunt, he then and there repaired to his capital and made it widely known by tom-tom that whoever brought him the girl who was the owner of the hair would be given half his kingdom.

Many were the people who, tempted by the magnificent offer, searched for the girl far and wide but in vain. For a long time, while the King languished in love, no one brought the correct girl.

At last one day an old woman of that city approached the King and asked him to give full particulars about the place and circumstances of his precious find. The King reported faithfully. Promising to return with the girl, the old woman departed.

With the help of the money advanced by the King of Cochin, the old woman managed to reach Nishadhapuri and locate the swimming pool at the beach at which the King of Cochin had found the unknown lady's hair. Collecting some firewood and cow-dung fuel from nearby places, she lit up at night what looked like a pyre and kept stoking the fire till daybreak.

A little before dawn Swarnakumari had been to her bathing *ghat* through the tunnel as usual and while she was bathing, the old hag raised a loud wail, ostensibly mourning the death of a near and dear one. Hearing the pitiful voice of a crying woman, Swarnakumari came out of the *ghat* and seeing the old woman seated before what looked like a pyre, went near her. Seeing her immersed in sorrow, the Princess asked her: "*Maji,* what makes you weep thus? Have you lost any one dear to you?"

On seeing her, the hag literally jumped on to Swarnakumari and hugging her, shouted: "O my daughter! Why do you talk thus, as though you never knew me? You died yesterday night and have now come back in less than half a day! How can you forget me so soon? Please say you are alive!" and shed profuse tears on her shoulders.

Swarnakumari thought: "The poor woman must have had a daughter resembling me. She must have lost her yesterday and burned her in this pyre. She is unable to erase that memory and that is why she behaves in this way!"

Trying to give relief to her sorrow, Swarnakumari said: "*Ma!* It is quite possible that two people might look alike. Although I am the Queen of this city, I shall, for your sake, be a daughter to you. You may therefore tell me freely about your sorrow. I shall try to allay it if it is within my power."

The old woman thereupon said "O lady! My daughter and I had been on a pilgrimage. It was on our way that my daughter suddenly died here. I have consigned her to the flames. The fire has not yet been extinguished. I have no one in this world besides her. O, what shall I do?" And she fell down.

Swarnakumari replied: "*Ma!* Do not worry. Do not think I am different from your daughter I shall fill her place. Please wait here for the day. Tomorrow I shall come and take you to my palace!"

Returning to the palace *via* the tunnel, Swarnakumari prostrated first, as usual, at the feet of her mother-in-law and later at her husband's. After briefly explaining to them her encounter with the old woman, she obtained their permission to take the old woman into the royal household.

Accordingly, the next morning the diabolical woman found a warm reception waiting for her at the palace, of which later she became a permanent member, enjoying all its comforts.

Not for long did she stay there in comfort, for she had not forgotten her mission. Soon she thought: "What is the purpose of my coming here and how long shall I stay here? The King of Cochin will curse me with every passing day and what will happen to my prize?"

The King of Nishadha had become quite familiar with the old woman whom he called "aunt". So one day he asked her jocularly: "Auntie! Tell me of any fruit you want to eat, be it seasonal or not, I shall get you the thing."

It was the season when the mango fruit was impossible to get and so she said: "Get me some *appus* (mangoes)."

The unsuspecting King put on the magic ring on his finger and after addressing a prayer to Siva, spoke: "I want some excellent *appus* for auntie to eat!" And lo, they were there on a platter, a dozen of them fresh from the tree, luscious and most inviting. The King took them and neatly cut them which he distributed to all those present. The old woman could not contain her wonder.

The old woman's plans matured at that moment: "Could I get that magic ring, I would spirit the Princess away to my Cochin King!"

After a couple of days, the old woman complained of severe headache and whatever medication was offered proved of no avail. Swarnakumari who had developed particular affection for that woman felt greatly worried. And so when she sat by her side pensively, the old woman amidst spasms of pain said: "My daughter! I must curse my own fate. You have been more than a daughter to me, but I fear this headache of mine will cause my life to fade away. Perhaps......... perhaps......... the magic ring which your husband wears might cure me of this accursed pain if only I wear it for a second on my finger..........."

Swarnakumari wrung her hands, caught between the devil and the deep sea. Said she: "Mother! You know my husband keeps it in his exclusive custody, and how possibly can I ask it of him?"

The old woman replied: "O my daughter, will a husband ever refuse his wife's request? Perhaps you are not keen to help me......"

This taunt touched Swarnakumari to the quick, and she said: "*Ma!* Please do not say so. I am not used to asking anything of my husband. Please tell me how I should ask him and for what?"

The old woman replied: "You are a simpleton. There is nothing in the world that a man will refuse his wife in the bedroom. Tonight when he comes to your bed, try to be naughty when he will offer to please you. At that time ask him, as though casually, 'Let me wear that ring for a moment, which, I am told, is the great conqueror of women's heart!' He will give it to you. Wearing it, move into the bathroom with his permission. Get out by the back-door and come here. Leaving the ring with me return to him quickly. He will have no time or patience to ask you about the ring. Try your best to humour him. You may come here before day-break and take the ring back from me. I shall have been completely cured of this pain!"

Little suspecting, Swarnakumari did exactly as she was advised and the magic ring came into the hands of the hag, right according to plan.

Without losing further time, the old woman put on the ring on her hand and willed: "I must go to Cochin!" And she was at Cochin standing before the King who had been eagerly waiting for her.

Giving the ring into his hands she asked him: "King, this is a powerful instrument. Wear it on your hand, pray to Lord Siva, and say: 'Let that girl who is the owner of the hair I found at Nishadha, come before me!' and wait."

The King of Cochin was cleverer. He took the ring, wore it, prayed and willed: "Let that girl come here right before me. Let her husband become insane, Let the city she lives in be burnt to ashes."

15. MAGIC RING RECOVERED

WHEN man plans for good or evil, he does so in the unsuspecting belief that his ingenuity will ultimately prevail. Hardly does he take into account the law of nature or will of God which has its own rules that often run counter to his intentions.

When with the aid of the magic ring the Raja of Cochin willed that the object of his infatuation be brought to him and all opposition be destroyed, he reckoned without the host.

The Queen of Nishadhapuri had just handed to her husband the soap-nut dough which she herself had pounded for his bath in the morning when she was bundled out of the palace by unseen hands and rushed to the presence of the Raja of Cochin.

Not before she stood in front of the Raja of Cochin with her unwashed hands did she realise that she had brought this calamity on her head by her own foolishness.

At the time of her departure she could see her capital caught in flames. At that time against her own conviction she tried to console herself that her husband would be safe because he was bathing in the pool.

It was not difficult for her later to conclude that it was all due to the old woman who had cleverly taken the magic ring from her husband. Much as she cursed herself for bringing the disaster on their head, she resolved to make good her lapse by determination and prayer.

The Raja of Cochin, who stood before her laughing sheepishly, advanced towards her for embracing, uttering words of endearment.

Controlling her revulsion, the Princess said: "Sir, tarry a little. Brahma had presumably ordained that I should marry you. But by a mischance, I cannot say how, I had to remain in another man's custody for a short time. Since however I have come back to you I would like to make a good beginning. I have to observe a *vrata* for eight days during which elaborate *pujas* and poor-feeding have to be done. Kindly permit me to observe this *vrata* after which I shall become your rightful queen."

The Raja of Cochin thought: "What harm is there in waiting for another eight days?" So he gave orders to the palace officials to make arrangements for the observance of the *vrata*.

Nishadhapuri had become a handful of ashes in no time and as guessed by the Princess, her husband had miraculously escaped along with his cat, but he nevertheless became a maniac.

So taking his cat, he roamed city after city begging for food for himself and his cat, until finally he reached Cochin on the eighth day.

Little knowing that his wife had been decoyed by the King, he joined the party of beggars who clamoured for food at the Cochin palace where the Princess, as usual, supervised the poor-feeding.

When it came to the turn of the maniac-king, he got his quota but demanded another for his cat too.

"Whoever would feed a cat? Get away from herel" shouted the officials.

But the maniac would not hear of it. He created a row which attracted the attention of the Princess.

When she saw the maniac, his unkempt hair and tattered clothes, her heart had almost leaped into her mouth, but having regard to the fact that she was not yet in a position to set things right, she directed from a distance to give the cat a share too and had both sumptuously fed.

Not having anything much to eat for the last seven days, the maniac-king had the fill of his stomach, and moving to the shade of a tree behind the palace, lay asleep like a log of wood with his faithful cat crouching by his side.

The place where the maniac-king slept happened to be by the side of the royal kitchen at whose side all the vessels used for cooking had been dumped for washing. The rats of the palace came there for lurking and skulking, and sported themselves nibbling at the left-overs in those vessels. At a distance stood a hefty rat, the leader of the party, to which the other rats brought the sweet puddings and other delicacies from among the remnants.

The mad Prince's cat had a brain-wave on seeing them. It immediately pounced upon the leader rat and started strangling its throat when it cried for mercy.

Then the cat said: "Allright, I will show you mercy; but to earn it, you must do me a service."

Rat: A service? I shall perform a dozen. Please tell me.

Cat: Listen. Somewhere in the palace, your Raja has a ring set with *jeeva-ratna.* Probably it is in his private room. You know what I mean. If by hook or crook, you bring it to me, I shall give back your life. Or...

Rat: Ooey!......I shall try my best. But......

Cat: No buts. Till it is brought you shall remain in my custody. You may send your army to search for it immediately and bring it to me.

Accordingly, the leader rat issued orders to its followers to fetch the magic ring from the palace.

The rats cantered in all directions and rummaged every corner of the palace till at last they found it tied to a silken chord hanging from the canopy of the Raja's couch. They tugged at it but it would not come off. So, they lent their entire weight by hanging by each other's tails train-wise, when the ring was torn from the chord. Holding it on their head, they brought it to their leader who passed it on to its captor, the cat, which in turn awoke its master by pulling him by the ears and scratching his face, as he was dog-tired.

When the maniac-Prince woke up, the faithful cat placed on his hands the magic ring. The sight of it brought back sanity to him when he hugged the cat to his bosom.

It was not difficult for him to divine how the precious ring was restored to him.

Wearing it, he uttered Shiva's prayer and willed to return to Nishadhapuri and the re-creation of the city with all the former inhabitants.

He next caused his wife's return.

He willed that the Raja of Cochin become insane and his city burnt to ashes. Last but not least he willed that the old woman who stole the ring summoned to Nishadhapuri.

Having done all this, the Prince called his mother, wife and ministers to a conference, and said: "Sympathy is an admirable sentiment but is a double-edged weapon. When it is misplaced, it can create incalculable harm. Look at my wife. She took pity on an old woman thinking she had lost her daughter. She not only brought her to the palace but treated her as her own mother. But look at what that wretch had done to her in return! By pretending to suffer from an incurable headache, she asked my wife to steal the precious ring from me and had all but killed us all, besides decoying her own benefactress. Had it not been for my cat—a little animal like that has the gratitude which a human being has not—I do not know what would have happened to us all. Now, by sheer fortuity of circumstances, I, in my mad state happened to roam in Cochin when my cat recovered the ring through the palace rats of Cochin. I have summoned the wretch of the old woman here to mete out the punishment she richly deserves. Minister! Put her in the limekiln and burn her for her betrayal of confidence and ingratitude."

Chaturya ended the story: "Thereafter he lived happily. Princess, don't you think that you must have for your husband a king as valourous and resourceful as the King of Nishadhapuri? Look, the night has ended and the streaks of the morning sun enter through the window! It does not behove you to stay here any longer. Begone!"

After hearing this absorbing story, the younger Princess stood up and left the bedroom to attend to her morning duties.

16. THE TORTOISE PRINCE

ON the fourth night* it was the turn of the younger Princess to meet her husband in the bedroom.

So, dressing appropriately for the occasion, she entered the chamber which was decorated like a miniature *deva-loka*. The sweet scents, the dull light and the exhilarating music were most provocative and if the Princess was walking in a dreamland, she was fully justified in her thoughts.

She had none of those compunctions she evinced on the first occasion, for had she not already become acquainted with *him?* Almost excitedly she neared the couch on which the mischievous-looking Chaturya lay poised on the prop of his left hand in deep contemplation, and without the other being aware of it, flung herself into his arms passionately.

"God created women, I believe, in haste and that is why they have no patience. Here I am, the legally married husband, destined to live with you for life, and you apparently do not believe it. Can't I have breathing time before I start life in right earnest?" observed Chaturya half in joke, half in embarrassment.

"O! My lord has not yet had time for breathing? Strange indeed! Now what should his dutiful wife do? May she be commanded!" replied she.

"Do not take my words seriously, Princess! All that I want you to do now is to listen to a story that is sure to interest you profoundly."

---

* We have omitted to give the story of the third night because it is identical with one that appeared in our Vikramaditya Series.

"With pleasure," replied she, throwing up her hands.

The two settled themselves comfortably on the sofa, and then Chaturya related this fascinating story:

Long long ago, a King by name Venkata Raja ruled over Mallikarjuna. Finding that even after a long time his wife did not bear him any children, he took another wife. You know the fate of the first wife when a man marries a second! But this King merely kept his first wife in a separate palace and engaged suitable attendants to wait on her. But it was the second wife who had to send her the daily rations of food and other eatables.

With her allowance, the elder Queen not only maintained herself but fed her maid-servant and the mare she used to ride.

God's laws are immutable and when the King found to his chagrin that his second wife too did not oblige him with children, he realised that getting children was neither chance nor design but the result of Karma or the blessing of God. So, he put his kingdom into the hands of his minister and repaired to the forest to propitiate Lord Siva. After long and arduous penance, the Lord appeared before him and gave him a mango-fruit on eating which his queens would conceive.

Praising the Lord for His mercy, the King returned to his capital, and handing the divine fruit to his second wife, said: "Dear! God gave me this fruit. If you eat this, you will bear divine children!"

The young Queen who heard this was transported to heaven with delight and lest her husband should remember his first wife, despatched him expeditiously on other errands.

Soon after the King had departed to his durbar, the second wife took out the mango-fruit, gleefully squeezed its juice into a golden bowl, swallowed it without leaving a particle behind and threw the nut out of her window into the street.

It so happened that the maid-servant who usually collected the daily rations for the first Queen had come that day too at that time and happened to listen unobserved to the conversation the King had with the younger Queen.

Learning all about the divine fruit, the maid hid herself in a dark corner to see what happened further.

Finally, when the younger Queen threw the nut away, the maid discreetly slid out, and taking the castaway nut, ran to her mistress and reported to her all that she heard, handing over to her the divine nut.

The elder Queen's bosom heaved as she too decided to partake of the divine blessing.

Breaking open the nut, she ate the kernel inside it and gave the rest to her maid, asking her to feed her faithful mare too with a part of it.

As a result of eating the divine fruit, all those who ate it got children. The younger Rani gave birth to two divine-looking sons while the elder Rani gave birth to a tortoise and the mare a marvel filly.

King Venkata who was only aware of the birth of the two sons to the second Queen, celebrated the event appropriately.

At the proper age he sent the two princes to school and taught them all the royal arts and sciences, and they grew to be wonderful boys who soon started taking part in state affairs.

The senior Queen, on the other hand, contented herself with the thought that we reap as we sow, that she was lucky only to bear a tortoise!

The love which a mother bears to her children can only be likened to the love of the Creator towards creation. Both have no preferences. Does a woman love her son less because he is ugly or malformed? No; perhaps she loves him more for the deformity.

Even so the elder Queen loved her tortoise-son with all her heart, born as he was out of her own flesh and blood. She fed him out of her breasts at proper hours, made a cosy bed for him by her side, covered him with soft sheets and made him enjoy all the comforts she could command. Thus the tortoise too grew up.

For some days past the elder Queen was finding that the food she had kept for the next day had been vanishing.

One day therefore she called her maid and asked: "Do you by any chance throw away the food I store up for the next day? Or……"

"No, Queen, do you think I would do so?" replied the woman, frightened.

Thinking that there must be some cat-burglar round about who does it, the Queen decided to keep awake that night and catch him.

At about midnight, she perceived a disturbance in the bed of her tortoise-son. As she looked more carefully, she saw the tortoise casting aside its shell and from out of it a human figure emerge, looking glorious like the Sun-god and proceeding noiselessly in the direction of the kitchen, entering it and eating the food left over by her for the morrow.

The Queen who had shadowed him on tip-toe could with the greatest difficulty contain her happiness, but when she controlled her surging emotion, her brain worked fast, as a result of which she took away the shell left behind and burnt it.

When the Prince after his nocturnal sojourn came back to enter his shell, he found it missing and before he looked up, the Queen-mother embraced him in sheer joy and said: "Darling! Why should you thus hide yourself in that shell? It was I who destroyed the shell. Are you angry? Won't you gladden my heart by remaining as you are?"

The Prince replied: "Mother, what a foolish thing have you done? I wanted to remain *incognito* for some more time. Now what is the use of crying over spilt milk? You have done what ought not to have been done. Now listen. Smear inky soot all over my body and keep me concealed in a box for some more time."

The mother half-heartedly agreed to do so wondering at the ways of sons.

In the meantime Lord Siva who granted to King Venkata the divine child-bearing fruit, called Sage Narada and said: "Sage! I have a commission for you. The elder Queen of Mallikarjuna has a son who does not know even the three R's, not having had the opportunity of learning. So you had better go to him and teach him all the four Vedas, all the *sastras,* sciences and the arts, and Manu. Initiate him into *Panchakshara-mantra* so that he can have the prophetic vision. Do you hear? Do not make any trouble, eh?"

"Would I ever?" replied Narada blandly.

Sage Narada accordingly sought the tortoise-Prince inside the box, and entering it, taught him all that Lord Siva had bade him.

One day King Venkata called his two sons (of the younger Queen) and said: "My children! I am happy to see you grown up and well-versed and well-behaved. I believe you will agree with me that the greatest duty of a son is to make his father's heart happy. Isn't it so?"

"Yes, father!" replied they and continued, "If you let us know your desire, we are ready here and now to see to its fulfilment."

"Well, my children! I have a longing. It is this. I know you will not laugh at me when I say it. To the north is the Himalayas. On its tallest peak is a girl who is peerless in her beauty. I want to marry her. Will you bring her to me?" said the King.

The princes bowed and replied: "Yes, father. It will be our sacred duty to bring that girl to you in a month. Please give us permission to proceed thither right now."

The King blessed his sons as they left on their mission.

The Tortoise-Prince who came to know of this assignment of his father by his prevision, became worried. Gifted as he had been most powerfully, it was possible for him to measure up the difficulty of the job.

It was well-nigh impossible of human endeavour. He knew it was quite impossible for his brothers.

Realizing that under the circumstances it was his duty to help his brothers achieve his father's desire, he told his mother all about it and sought her permission to follow his brothers so as to be of assistance to them.

"I bless you, my son!" said the elder Queen as she bade him adieu.

The Tortoise-Prince, painted jet black all over, and wearing tattered clothes, followed the two brothers in their quest.

As he straggled behind them, the two brothers thought that he was some forest-dweller.

17. THE TORTOISE-PRINCE WEDS

FAMILY tie is now fast becoming more a legend than a fact. Unselfish love among brothers is also the exception, not the rule. How then could we expect that bond of love between step-brothers, more so in the circumstances placed as our Tortoise-Prince and his two step-brothers were? If there was tolerance, it was more due to the fact that he was not known as one. Yet, the Tortoise-Prince, fired by a sense of duty, followed his two younger brothers from a distance unperceived by them.

As they proceeded, a large stream interposed and the horses which they rode shied. The two younger princes, therefore, dismounted and leaving the carriers behind, forded the stream by wading through it, occasionally sipping a few handfuls of water.

The Tortoise-Prince who walked behind saw them crossing the river. However, as he came near it, he found to his dismay that it was not a natural river, but constituted the drainage of the royal household of the place. The yellowish colour of the water was unmistakably due to the wash of the womenfolk containing in it a large percentage of the *kesar* used by them. He pitied his brothers drinking them.

Finding it insanitary to wade through it, the Tortoise-Prince flew across it by his superior powers and landed on the other bank. When he did so, however, surprise awaited him; for, officials of that kingdom received him like an honoured guest and asked him to mount a royal palanquin and proceed to the palace.

"But, why all this fuss," asked he, "to merit this reception? I am but a poor wood-cutter come here out of curiosity and I will quit this place by nightfall."

The officials, who felt embarrassed, explained to him in detail the cause of their action. Said they: "Sir, the Princess of this city has ordered that whoever crosses this channel without walking through it should be brought to her."

"What does it matter to her how one crosses it?" asked he in return.

"The fact is, sir," said they, "this is not a natural waterway at all. The water from the palace flows through it. Whoever recognizes it to be such and consequently will neither drink of it nor wade through while crossing should be an extraordinary person. And it is the intention of the Princess to marry him."

"O!" ejaculated the Prince rather taken aback at the revelation, and said: "I think there must be some mistake. I—I—I happened to cross it in the way I did by sheer accident and you will be the first to agree that I am anything but a fit person to marry a Princess. Look, leave me alone and forget me. Most likely a real prince might yet cross this channel in the way desired by your Princess. Please..."

The officials replied: "Sir, we have been waiting at this place for a year now and to date none but you have done it. And one never knows whether anybody else will. You must know what will happen to us when she knows that we have failed to report about you. Please be kind enough to follow us to the palace and our duty will be over and you may tell the Princess direct whatever you like."

Not finding it possible to put them off, the Tortoise-Prince thought that so long as he was true to himself and to God, whatever happened must be for the good. Leaving the result in God's hands, he asked them to wait for a few moments. He then jumped back to the other bank and, holding the two steeds left behind which belonged to his brothers, flew back to where the officials were standing. Beckoning to his two brothers who had gone ahead, he handed over to them their horses. They received them gratefully from him and admired his ability in bringing the horses across, although he was a rustic.

The Tortoise-Prince, by this act, succeeded in carving out a nice corner for himself in the hearts of the two princes and won their consent to follow him to the royal palace. When the palanquin was brought, all the three mounted it and all along, the three of them chatted and cracked jokes, the younger princes not yet knowing the identity of the other.

At the palace-gate, a great reception, with the King himself in the lead, awaited them. When the three occupants alighted from the palanquin, the officials at the river-bank respectfully pointed to the black-coated rustic as the man who had performed the feat. The King's face turned pale, which, however, he cleverly hid from the visitors, and conducted all the three to the State-room where the Princess awaited with her garland.

Left to the King, he would have turned out the rustic long before; but he feared his daughter who, he thought, was pigheaded enough to impose an impossible condition on the choice of her husband, and who now seemed to be reaping the whirlwind. He wished that she might, at least after seeing the rustic, recant. But that was not to be.

The fact was that the Princess had already taken more than a passing look at her husband-to-be and from her deliberate manner, it appeared, she had decided to marry him.

When, therefore, amidst the hushed stillness of the gathering, she, with her garland, advanced towards him in measured steps, the rustic-looking Prince said: "Princess, stop a while. Have a good look at me. Do I look like one fit to marry you? For heaven's sake, think twice before doing what you are about to do. I, for one, am quite willing to let you go by default and shall pray that a more gallant and presentable young man like my friends here may marry you."

"I am quite clear in my mind of what I am doing," replied the Princess.

"Well, if that be your decision, I must impose one condition and that is I shall neither bathe nor change to better clothes. Do you feel like living with one who lives like that? You are still free to leave me out," said the Tortoise-Prince.

"Yes, I am quite willing to abide by your decision," replied the Princess to the astonishment of the assembly and the King's face turned ashen.

"Let the inevitable happen, then!" said the Prince throwing up his hands in despair, when, to the accompaniment of Vedic chants of palace priests and auspicious music, the Princess garlanded the rustic-looking prince and stood bashfully at his side holding his hands in hers in determination.

That night when the bride and the bridegroom were alone in the nuptial chamber, the Tortoise-Prince told the Princess: "Princess! I am the eldest son of King Venkata of Mallikarjuna. I was born of his elder queen and the two "friends" who came with me are my brothers, born of the younger queen. By the way, they do not know my identity. Now, my father has asked them to bring a particular girl from the Himalayas for him to marry. I am following them unknown to help them in the task. My father has given them a month's time to accomplish that task. Already, two precious days are over. There are barely 28 days left. I must follow them tomorrow on their onward journey. On my way back, I shall pick you up. If I fail to turn up, you had better look for me in the Himalayas." The Princess looked at him admiringly.

Early in the morning, the rustic-looking Prince left that city and followed by the two brother-princes who had by then become quite chummy with him, went out of the city.

After travelling for some time they reached another city at the gates of which stood a party of officials who stopped them and asked:

"Sir, can you do this work for us?"

"What work?" asked the younger Princes.

"I shall give you one pie. With that pie you must buy oil, firewood and leaf and yet return the pie. The Princess of this city has promised to marry the man who can do that."

18. INGRATITUDE

APPARENTLY those were days when the brain was as much in demand as brawn, and princes were as much judged by their commonsense as by their prowess. When the two younger Princes of Mallikarjuna heard the fantastic proposition of the local Princess, they thought the Princess to be a half-wit, and therefore exclaimed: "O, ho! You will give us one pie and out of that we must not only get you oil, firewood and leaf but return that pie in addition. Obviously your Princess is cranky or why should a woman of her standing be so stingy as all that? We for our part are certainly not interested either in your Princess or her offer. Let us go."

The Tortoise-Prince who was coming behind them heard all that had passed between his brothers and the palace officials of that place. Finding that his brothers had gone past them, he called them back and together with them asked the palace guards to explain the proposition once again. When they did so, the Tortoise-Prince offered to fulfil those conditions when the officials gave him the telltale pie.

The Tortoise-Prince on receiving the pie walked ten feet ahead with it and seeing a sesame plant by the road, pulled it out of the earth and giving it to the official said: "Sir, take this plant and give it to your Princess. Tell her that these fruits when squeezed will give til-oil; the plant when dried will become excellent firewood and of course there are leaves in the plant. Here is the pie. Tell your Princess that I have thus fulfilled all her conditions."

The palace officials ran to communicate the solution of the newcomer, his explanation and his extremely unkingly appearance.

To their surprise, the Princess was taken aback, apparently of course by the apposite explanation of the wood-cutter and proceeding to her father, said: "Father, I have at last found a man who matches my intellect. He has solved my riddle and fulfilled my conditions. I shall now marry him."

"But, dear," protested the King, "do you know that the man who solved your riddle is but a wood-cutter and hardly suitable to marry into a royal family?"

"Yes, father, but I care more for intelligence than beauty," replied the Princess.

"Then have your way!" said the King and sent the royal palanquin to fetch the Tortoise-Prince. Upon its arrival, the Tortoise-Prince invited the hesitant brothers to accompany him and together they arrived at the palace. On the same day the marriage of the local Princess with the Tortoise-Prince was solemnised.

Alone with the bride, the Tortoise-Prince confided to her who he was and what brought him there and ended: "My dear! It is in the course of that quest that I came across your strange offer. Destiny has put us together. But I cannot stay here longer. I must get going early in the morning at the call of my self-imposed duty. By God's grace, I shall succeed in my undertaking. If, however, after seven days you do not hear from me, you may proceed to the Himalayas and look for me."

Rising with the sun, the Tortoise-Prince accompanied his brothers on the Himalayan quest. For some days they walked across difficult terrain criss-crossed by peaks and ravines. Finally they entered a city. There too an invitation awaited them to marry the daughter of the local king provided they could understand and explain an abstract metaphysical treatise written by her. The two younger Princes of Mallikarjuna who rode on their steeds saw the treatise but could not make head or tail out of it. So they handed it back to the officials saying they were not interested in it. The Tortoise-Prince who followed them, however, took it and explained the various passages as easily as though he had himself written them all. The delighted officials thereupon ran to their Princess and informed her of it. The Princess thereupon ran to her royal father and told him: "Father, I have after all found the great man equal to me in attainments. You may therefore arrange my marriage with him."

The King hurried to the roadside with appropriate accompaniments and prayed to the ugly-looking Tortoise-Prince to accept his daughter in marriage. As usual, the Tortoise-Prince requested his brothers to accompany him to the palace, but they refused, saying: "This man has made it a business to marry all the Princesses on the way. What have we to do with his marriage? Let us go our way." So they left him at the place and hurried to the Himalayas, and locating the highest peak, searched in vain for the Himalayan Princess whom their father wanted to marry. Thoroughly exhausted, they sat down in the biting cold.

The Tortoise-Prince, on the other hand, hurriedly stepped into the royal palanquin decorated with costly pearls and reached the palace where the Princess was married to him at an auspicious moment in due pomp and grandeur. While the bride and the bridegroom were alone, the Tortoise-Prince confided to her who he was and what made him come there. He concluded: "Darling! I have to hurry up to help my brothers who in all probability are languishing on the way. If in the course of six days you fail to hear from me, you had better come to the Himalayas to look for me."

Asked the Princess: "My Lord! May I know how you will manage to bring the Himalayan Princess?"

This made the Tortoise-Prince suspect that his latest bride knew about the Himalayan Princess and so he asked her, "Best of women! Will you kindly enlighten me as to how I should bring her?"

Replied his bride: "Lord! Do not think that the Himalayan Princess is of the ordinary kind of woman. Her beauty is the craze of even the gods. She lives on the top of the Himalayas. No mortal can see her from below. If you go round the peak reverentially, you will notice a creeper coming down from the top. If you hold the creeper and climb uphill along its track, it will lead you to her abode. The moment she sees you she will take you to her bed because she is so pent up with passion. It is up to you to tackle her with sweet words and bring her down. I now give you leave to proceed on your quest."

In the morning the Tortoise-Prince resumed his journey to the Himalayas and travelled hastily since he was worried that any harm might befall his less-accomplished younger brothers. Soon he reached the peak and after a lengthy search, saw his two brothers seated on a rock woe-begone.

Calling them to his side, all three went round the peak thrice, at the end of which, as described by his last wife, he noticed the creeper coming down from the top. Asking his brothers to wait for him, he climbed up the peak with cat-like agility along the creeper. After a strenuous climb, he reached the palace whose door opened at his touch. Proceeding inside, he reached the zenana where the Himalayan Princess, glorious like the morning sun, came towards him dancing excitedly and with unmistakable intentions. Just as she was about to embrace him, the Tortoise-Prince threw his magic sword on the floor and fell at the Princess' feet stating: "Madam! I have come here to request you to marry my father and become my mother."

"Don't you know that it is my pledge to marry him alone who successfully climbs up to my abode?" asked she rather sternly.

"Quite true, Madam! But inasmuch as I have fulfilled your condition, is it not right that you should act according to my desire?" asked the Prince persuasively.

"All right. Then, tell me all about you," ordered the Princess. Thereupon the Tortoise-Prince related all about him from beginning to end and said: "My brothers are waiting for you at the foot of the hill. Will you kindly follow me?"

The Princess agreed to start immediately and followed by the Tortoise-Prince descended along the creeper and reached the foot of the hill where the younger Princes anxiously awaited them.

As soon as they reached the foot of the hill, the Tortoise-Prince remembered that he had left his magic sword in the palace above, and so leaving the Himalayan Princess to the care of his brothers, again went up the hill along the creeper.

The two younger brothers who had become exasperated by the achievements of the wood-cutter, thought this was the best time to dispose of him and so, as the former was coming down along the creeper, snapped the creeper by tugging at it with all their might from below. When the creeper broke in two, the Tortoise-Prince came tumbling down the peak and the impact of the fall smashed his body into smithereens.

19. THE TORTOISE-PRINCE COMES BACK TO LIFE

SEEING how the dastardly act of the two younger Princes brought about the gruesome fate to her deliverer, the Himalayan Princess was first shocked and then found herself in tears. Bewailed she: "O, what a sad fate for such a noble, brave and dutiful man!"

The two younger Princes put on a face of sorrow and explained: "Princess, do not grieve. When we held the creeper for him, we never thought that it would snap and thus kill our friend and benefactor. Perhaps it was his fate. Of what use crying over spilt milk? Will a dead man come back, however much we grieve? Like a brave woman, follow us and we shall take you to our country, Mallikarjuna, of which our late friend must have told you. Be brave of heart!"

The Princess wiped her tears and started in their company to the destination to which the late wood-cutter Prince wanted her to be taken. After a long and arduous journey, the three of them reached Mallikarjuna. Seeking the presence of their father, the two younger Princes said: "Father, by God's grace, we have been able to get the Himalayan Princess whom you wanted to marry."

"O, my darlings!" exclaimed the King and embracing them in admiration, added, "Where is she? Take me now to wherever she is."

"She is in the harem, father! Please come." And they led him to her apartment.

King Venkata stood stunned by her beauty as it excelled all the reports he had heard of her and even his imagination. Like a child he implored her: "My lovely doll! Do you know how I have longed for you for days together without food or sleep? Now, I can't wait any more. Let us marry right now!"

"Your Highness!" replied the Himalayan Princess, "I have come here for no other purpose than marrying you. As you say, you have waited for me all these days. May I request you to bear with me for six months more within which I hope to complete the observance of a *vrata* I have set myself before the marriage? And by the way, Your Highness may also be pleased to sanction the expenditure in connection with that function."

"My darling! Of course, I shall wait till you successfully accomplish your vow. Now, my officials have orders to supply all your needs in connection with your *vrata*. Are you satisfied? But may I come here now and then to see you? Would you object?"

The Princess on hearing this laughed outright at which the King felt himself transported to heaven and then left. Left to think out things for herself the Himalayan Princess seized the opportunity to perform large-scale *dharma* and *dana*.

In the meantime the first wife of the Tortoise-Prince waited for 26 days and not seeing him return or hearing any news from him, started towards the Himalayas on the 27th day and reaching there, succeeded in tracing his remains upon which she broke down completely. Tears ran like streams down her cheeks as she rolled up her dead husband's mutilated body.

The second wife too finding that the time for his return was overdue hastened to the Himalayas right up to the spot spoken of by him and finding another woman weeping over what was unmistakably the Tortoise-Prince's body, asked the first wife: "Who are you, madam? The body is that of my husband. He had asked me to look for him here in case he did not return."

The first wife who looked up at this newcomer related amidst sobs her relationship to the late Prince. Hearing this, the two women took to each other as sisters in their sorrow over their late common husband. The third wife too joined them soon. After giving vent to their sorrow, they started thinking of the next step to take.

The third wife of the Tortoise-Prince was an uncommon woman. Like her husband, she too was endowed with superhuman perception and faculties. So she said: "Sisters, there is no point in continuing to weep. We must do everything in our power to restore our dead husband to life. Now, one of you, please, collect the different parts of the body and put them together properly. Let another sharpen our husband's magic sword while I shall go to the stream nearby, bathe and return here."

While the other two women did as they were told, the third wife returned from the stream and with all her power of devotion and prayer and possibly other powers, sprinkled the water sanctified by spells, saying: "If we are true *pativratas*, let our husband come back to life." The miracle did happen and the battered dead Prince sat up hale and hearty as though from sleep. What could he do better than embrace all his three beloved spouses who were collectively responsible for rescuing him from the other world?

To his eager wives the Tortoise-Prince related how he correctly located the Himalayan Princess by the directions of his third wife and how while coming down the creeper for the second time, his brothers actually cut the creeper and killed him. He ended: "I can have no more claim on my body or life. It now belongs entirely to you collectively as you have given me a new life."

The Tortoise-Prince and his three wives started descending in order to return to Mallikarjuna. The party first stayed in the Palace of the third wife. The King of the country not only entertained them lavishly but also gave gifts of large sums of money and a small army to his son-in-law. Similarly, the second and first fathers-in-law also added to the Prince's army and made other presents. Thus after crossing many a hill and dale, the party reached a village near Mallikarjuna.

The Tortoise-Prince stationed his large retinue and wives at that village and said: "My dears, please stay all of you here in this village. I shall presently send my mother too to be under your care while I go to the capital alone."

Reaching home the Tortoise-Prince fell at the feet of his mother who had almost given up hope about him since he did not return while his brothers did with their trophy. When she was in a fit position to listen, the Tortoise-Prince related to her all that happened to him since he last parted from her and ended: "Mother! Your daughters-in-law are eager to prostrate themselves before your holy feet!"

The elder Queen would not wait a second more, so mother and son went back to the camp where her three daughters-in-law received her most affectionately and reverentially. They washed her feet with water from Ganga and showered flowers all about her as they themselves repeatedly fell at her feet and the face of each member of the party glistened with joy.

The elder Queen returned to her palace soon after, together with her three incomparable daughters-in-law in a palanquin. The Tortoise-Prince of course lived as usual incognito.

The Himalayan Princess found herself confronted with a problem. She had asked for a moratorium in the shape of a *vrata* hoping she would hear news about the Tortoise-Prince, but little news was coming through. Thus reflected she: "The half-yearly reprieve is nearly over. The sons of the King's second wife almost killed their eldest brother for the sake of usurping his glory. Now, unless I know for certain about the fate of the eldest Prince, I cannot decide one way or the other. Let me devise a ruse. I shall tell the King that I shall marry him only on receiving the divine lotus from Akhilandakoti-Tirtha which is beyond the Seven Seas. I know the Tortoise-Prince alone can fetch it. That way I shall clear my doubt."

When King Venkata came to see her next time, the Himalayan Princess put on her sweetest attitude and said: "Yes, My lord, the *vrata* is almost over. All that remains is the arrival of the divine lotus from the Akhilandakoti-Tirtha which is on the other side of the Seven Seas. When it does, you can fix the *muhurta*."

"Of course, the lotus will come," said he and, returning to his apartments, called his two younger sons and said: "My darlings! You achieved the impossible in bringing for me the Himalayan Princess. A greater test awaits you. Unless you pass it—I have no doubt you will succeed—I think my wish will still remain unfulfilled." And he explained how they should bring the divine lotus.

"Yes, father, we shall!" replied they, highly gratified by the compliment paid by their royal father and the knowledge of his high expectations of them.

Preparing themselves for the journey the two younger Princes mounted their steeds and rode in the direction of the Seas with the idea of crossing them. But when they reached the foreshore, their horses refused to proceed further. The two brothers were left wondering how to cross the seas. When they found it impossible, the realization came to them how their bragging and unlawful claim had brought them to this sorry mess.

Ultimately they felt: "If only we had that noble woodcutter! Had it not been for him, could we have brought the Himalayan Princess? He is no more. We don't know if we were right or wrong in bringing about his death. But our failure to succeed in the present commission will certainly put us in a spot."

20. IN QUEST OF THE DIVINE LOTUS

It is the mark of a cad to think of a person only when he wants to get something done by him and to ignore, if not speak ill of him, when there is no need for him; but it is the mark of a great man to offer help even unsolicited.

The younger sons of the King of Mallikarjuna had no compunction whatsoever in making short work of their elder brother and expropriate his honours at one time; but, when the need again arose for his services, they had the audacity to wish that he were alive.

The Tortoise-Prince, on the other hand, who had the gift of prevision, had already seen the predicament in which his ungrateful brothers had been placed and, like the great soul that he was, made himself ready to jump on to their help.

He went up to his mother and reported to her: "Mother, my brothers are now standing before the waves of the sea unable to cross it. Father has ordered them to bring the Divine Lotus from Akhilandakoti-Tirtha and they feel sorry they thoughtlessly did me harm. You will agree with me that inasmuch as they have not succeeded in killing me and now that I am hale and hearty, I should not fail in my duty towards them and must go to their help. May I, therefore, seek your blessings to go and offer them whatever help I can give?"

The elder Rani, herself an incarnation of self-sacrifice, had little difficulty in perceiving the wisdom of her son's decision and approving of it. Embracing him fondly, she gave him her blessings unreservedly for the success of his mission.

The Tortoise-Prince then went to his first and second wives to whom also he related his proposed mission and got their permission. When, however, he went to his third wife and unfolded his plans, she asked him mildly, "My lord, may I take the liberty of asking you how you propose to bring that Divine Lotus?"

The Tortoise-Prince, apologising profoundly to her, said: "My darling, how thoughtless of me not to have asked you how I should go about it, knowing, as I do, of your immense abilities! Were it not for you, would I be alive today? Please, therefore, be kind enough to guide me."

The third wife replied: "My lord! You are an epitome of humility itself. You ask me as though you are not capable of accomplishing it all by yourself. Yet, since you have ordered me to help you, I shall tell you what little I know of it and give you such help as I can."

The Tortoise-Prince felt immensely happy at having such a jewel of a wife who could be so great and yet so humble. He admired her for her reticence, for it is our common experience to see people, who know very little, brag about their abilities sky-high.

The Princess ended: "My lord, may you be pleased to accept these seven pebbles and this chit from me. As soon as you confront the first sea, please drop one of the pebbles and pray, 'Please give me way now and overflow later.' In this way, you will be able to cross the Seven Seas at the end of which you will see the Akhilandakoti-Tirtha. Standing on the bank of the Tirtha, please call out 'Chandamaruta Kodanda Rakshasa, please come.' At this a Rakshasa will present himself before you. Please hand over this chit to him and he will show you the way to get the Divine Lotus."

Expressing his gratefulness to his wife, the Tortoise-Prince put on the garb of the indigent wood-cutter and proceeded to the seashore where his two half-brothers were standing lost in thought. Going near them, he addressed them: "Friends, you seem worried. What is the matter with you? Can I be of help to you?"

On seeing this man return alive, the younger princes stood there dazed, overcome not only by contrition but also by fear. It took them a few moments to realise and satisfy themselves that the other person was not a ghost but the real man. The next stage in their mental state was great admiration, not unmixed with jealousy, at the fact that this man, despite what they had done for him, had managed to come back alive, and what was more, offer further help, completely forgetting the harm done to him and their ingratitude towards him.

Seeing them nonplussed, the Tortoise-Prince immediately put them at their ease by pleasant banter. When they got over their fear complex, he addressed them: "What shall we say, friend? You were kind enough to help us in a great job, but now we find ourselves faced with a more difficult one. It is this: our father has commanded us to bring the Divine Lotus from the Akhilandakoti-Tirtha situated on the other side of the Seven Seas. We do not know how we are going to accomplish it. Naturally, we thought of you. And we had given up the new task as utterly hopeless since we knew that you had died by an accident as we ourselves saw it."

Smiling disarmingly, the Tortoise-Prince replied: "I can quite see that it is a difficult job, as you say. But I think by God's grace I can again be of help to you. However, I dare not make you cross the oceans, but I promise to bring the flower and give it to you if you permit me to go alone."

Relieved that it would not be necessary for them to undertake the risky adventure, the two younger brothers replied: "We do not at all mind, friend, your going alone. It will be quite all right with us if you can somehow bring that flower and give it to us. We shall await you here, if you don't mind."

Bidding them adieu and assuring them of the success of the mission, the Tortoise-Prince walked out of their presence. Reaching a secluded part of the seashore, he threw one of the pebbles given by his third wife and uttered the prayer: "O, Ocean, make room for me now and fill up later."

Just as foretold by her, the ocean made a perfectly safe way for him along which he proceeded not bothering to look back.

Thus the Tortoise-Prince crossed the Seven Seas and reached the famous Akhilandakoti-Tirtha.

Seeing it, he was charmed by the scenery. It was a place where peace reigned supreme, unsullied by human contact. But for the knowledge gained from his wife that it was infested by Rakshasas, he would have thought it was God's sanctuary.

Not losing any time, he mounted the bank of the Tirtha and called out: "O! Chandamaruta Kodanda Rakshasa, please come."

As his voice boomed to the farther reaches of the Tirtha, he saw a mountainous figure lumbering towards him. It was not difficult for the Prince to see fire sparking from the mouth of the approaching Rakshasa. It was patent that he was enraged that a human voice should beckon to him unceremoniously and disturb his repast. When, however, the figure came very near him, the Prince offered him *pranams* and taking out with reverence the chit given to him by his third wife, gently pressed it into the hands of the Rakshasa.

The moment the Rakshasa scanned the hieroglyphics on the chit, he went into raptures and exclaimed, "Ha! Mother, has it taken such a long time for you to bless us?"

With these words, he beckoned to one of his aides who was not any the less fearsome and placing the chit in his hand, commanded him: "Take this man to our King."

Accordingly, followed by the Tortoise-Prince, the aide descended along the steps of the Tirtha and neared the surface of the water. There a huge crocodile lay with wide open mouth. The aide deposited the chit into its mouth, and the reptile dived into the water immediately.

Swimming fast, it went to the King of the Rakshasas who had his palace in the bowels of the lake.

When the Rakshasa King received the chit, he practically fell down on all fours. Bowing reverently before the chit, he plucked one of those Divine Lotuses and taking some valuable jewels too for the writer of that chit, delivered them to the crocodile. He then said: "O! Crocodile, please hand these things over to the man who has brought the chit. Tell him that this is the Divine Lotus asked for in the chit and these jewels are meant for the writer of that chit. After giving them, you must carry him on your back across the Seven Seas and safely deposit him on the seashore near the city."

Accordingly, the crocodile delivered the presents and the Divine Lotus into the hands of the Tortoise-Prince and carried him across the Seven Seas in an hour and a half. After leaving the Tortoise-Prince precisely at the spot from which he had started, it took leave. On alighting, the Prince hurried to where his two half-brothers were awaiting him.

Handing over the Divine Lotus to them, he went home and prostrated himself before his mother to whom he related his great experiences. After that, he went to his third wife to whom also he related his experiences and handed her the jewels sent by the Rakshasa King. It was not at that time clear which of the two, the husband or the wife, was more happy.

The two younger half-brothers, without even caring to express their thanks to their elder brother, who too did not seem to expect them, whipped their horses and sought an audience with their father. Then they placed the Divine Lotus in his hands.

The old King, overcome with joy, virtually hoisted his two sons on to his shoulders and blessed them from the bottom of his heart for their exemplary conduct. He took the flower straightaway to the Himalayan Princess.

No sooner did the King announce himself than the Himalayan Princess came out herself with the question on her lips, "Has the Divine Lotus arrived?"

And the old King handed it to her delicately.

It was easy for her to recognize the Divine Lotus as such and it was easier still for her to conclude that the person who had brought it was none else than the King's eldest son. And what was more important to her was the knowledge that the eldest son was alive and kicking.

Replied she: "My lord, you can now fix the *muhurta* and arrange for the wedding at any time."

The King literally ran to his chambers and issued a spate of orders for the celebration of the marriage on an unprecedented scale. Invitations went out to all the kings of the land and orders were issued to all the entertainers of the land to make themselves available at the function. The *shamiana* was decorated in a manner which evoked the envy of the gods.

As all the invitees had been assembling and the function was getting into start, the bride was being draped in angelic robes.

On arrival at the *pandal* she was introduced to the Rajas assembled there and the priest was counting the minutes for seating the couple on the dais before the Vedic fire for the performance of the marriage.

At that time, the Himalayan Princess gently stroked the King on the side and told him in private: "Would you please be kind enough to send for your first wife and her son too? I have decided that your first son, born of your first wife, shall give me away in marriage to your good self as soon as he arrives."

King Venkata was thoroughly nonplussed because for aught he knew, his first wife had not borne him any issues, and it was because of that fact, that he had to take another wife. He ran through his mind how he had to perform *tapas* and obtain the divine mango for the birth of his two sons by the second wife.

Greatly intrigued but without in the least giving himself away, King Venkata replied: "Most assuredly, love. Would you mind if I personally go and fetch them?"

"No, certainly not," replied the Himalayan Princess and added: "I would love you to do that."

When the King left for the purpose in his marital robe, the Tortoise-Prince was having a chat with his mother. He intuitively perceived his father's hurrying up to them. He therefore told his mother: "Mother, you will be happy to hear that father is coming here right now to invite you and me to attend his marriage. Please be good enough to dress appropriately for the occasion and prepare your daughters-in-law too for the function. In the meantime, I am getting all my paraphernalia from yonder village. All of you, please, be in time to receive the King."

By the time the King reached the palace of the first queen, the whole family was ready to receive him in royal manner with the Tortoise-Prince shining resplendently as Devendra himself at the head.

Offering obeisance to his father, he washed his feet, took him inside, seated him on a golden chair, when the Queen and all the three daughters-in-law prostrated themselves before him.

While the King submitted to all these demonstrations of respectful regards mechanically, he was in reality living in a world of phantasmagoria. Yet, with tact and diplomacy, he blessed them all and invited them to come and attend the marriage which was about to start.

So, followed by the entire household, the party returned to the marriage *pandal* to the accompaniment of orchestral and other forms of music.

At the function the elder Queen took her rightful place in the gathering and showed herself keen on adorning her husband appropriately for the occasion. Her son appeared to vie with her in his enthusiastic attention and devotion to the King on this joyous occasion.

Leading him by the hand, the elder Queen seated the King on the dais before the sacred marriage *Agni*. The *muhurta* arrived. The bride was brought who took her seat by the King's side.

Just before the commencement of the most important part of the function, the bride made a request to her husband-to-be that a curtain be thrown around her for a few minutes.

When it was done, she told the audience in a clear voice from inside: "May I address the great Kings and illustrious persons assembled in this *shamiana* for a few minutes? As soon as I finish, the marriage ceremony may begin."

Pin-drop silence reigned.

She, then, quickly ran over the family history of King Venkata, how he happened to marry the second wife and get two sons by her and how he ordered his younger sons to fetch her from the Himalayas and how he was ignorant of the son by the first wife. She then addressed her would-be-husband: "Please ask your younger sons if it is not a fact that they maliciously killed their elder brother who was in a wood-cutter's garb, in order to rob him of what was really his glory? Ask them also if it is not a fact that the same elder brother, come back to life, who really fetched the Divine Lotus from across the Seven Seas and the younger brothers are in reality impostors for the second time in claiming the credit for themselves? May I ask your eldest son to relate how he came back to life after being murdered by his own brothers?"

On being dramatically called upon to explain how he came back to life and to the rescue of his ungrateful brothers, the Tortoise-Prince ascended the rostrum and gave, more apologetically than heroically, a faithful account of all that had happened to him and what he had done.

It is easy to imagine the reaction among the people assembled there including King Venkata who, like a caged lion, fretted and fumed. But, having regard to the fact that he was getting married, he quietly called his eldest son and told him, "My son, I am ashamed that you should have been put to so many difficulties. Both as a father and as a king, I owe you a duty which I hereby accomplish by handing both my younger sons to you with permission to punish them in any manner you like."

The Tortoise-Prince replied: "Father, I very much appreciate your attitude. I beg leave of you to let my younger brothers alone. I completely absolve them of any crime they might have inadvertently attempted to commit. Further, I can assure you that I can look after myself quite well. Above all, there is the Omnipotent God Who alone is the arbiter and it does not become me to take His law into my hands. If they had meant ill by me, they will rue their own fate."

Saying this, he led his father to the matrimonial dais and, as desired by the Himalayan Princess, gave her away in marriage to his own father. His mother looked on with a beaming face.

Having brought the audience to a happy frame of mind, the Prince went around the nobility assembled there and saw to it that they were adequately honoured.

King Venkata, with his newly-wedded wife and all his three sons and daughters-in-law, lived happily ever after.

At this stage, Chaturya addressed the second Princess: "My dear, don't you think you should marry a prince of the type of the Tortoise-Prince and not any man of my kind? Look! The night has worn out and the sun is rising on the eastern horizon. You had better be gone."

The Princess, overjoyed at the story, repaired to the harem.

21. JAGATALA-PRATAPA

WITH the dawn of the fifth day, Chaturya put on his best dress and having enjoyed the day in lively banter, awaited the evening.

At night, as he sat in the nuptial chamber, the elder Princess came, for it was her turn, with all the paraphernalia for the newly-wed, and it was apparent from her manner that she was determined to make him her husband *de facto*.

But Chaturya was not in a mood to grant her wish.

Not knowing what was passing in his mind, the Princess seated herself beside Chaturya on the lovely cot and tried to embrace him. Chaturya, on the other hand, parried her and remarked jocularly, "My dear, you seem to have no patience at all. You know, I am your legally wedded husband and am going to live the rest of my life with you. We have waited all these days and what harm is there if we wait for a few more days? Well, if you cannot wait that long, at least wait until I finish telling you a very interesting story."

Dejected at what Chaturya was attempting to do, she nevertheless yielded to the temptation of listening to the story he was about to tell her. She folded her hands and throwing them on her lap, resigned herself to listening to him. Said Chaturya:

There was a city called Udayagiri and King Lokadhipa ruled over it. He had seven sons. As usual with the kings of yore, he had taught all his sons not only the Vedas and

Shastras and the sixty-four *kalas*, but also the royal arts like archery and warfare. In course of time, they all became adepts and when they grew up, he built a separate palace for each of them and housed them separately. He had also provided them with ample wherewithal to lead princely lives and they lived happily.

With a view to testing how they fared intellectually, the King called all of them one night to the terrace of his palace when the moon was shining in full splendour. As they came, he asked the first son, "My son, I want to ask you a question. Answer me frankly and without any reservation whatsoever. Look at the moon! How beautifully it shines. Now, what would you like to do under this glorious moon?"

The first son replied, "Father, I think it would be excellent to carry out an invasion now against our enemies with our fourfold armies so that we can gain victory in a trice."

Dismissing him, the King called the second son and asked him the same question. Replied he, "Father, in my opinion, the time is best suited to draw water from wells for irrigating our crop-bearing fields which we can do, not only without fatigue but also with joy."

The King then called his third son and repeated the same question to which the latter replied as follows: "Father, if you yoke the bulls and plough the fields, you will get excellent results and both men and beasts will not feel the exertion."

After sending him away, the King called his fourth son and asked him the same question. Replied he, "Father, I think the time is most suitable for making journeys. If we travel under this full moon, there will not be any perspiration and the journey will be interesting and enjoyable."

Calling the fifth son, the King asked him the same question to which he replied, "The time is most suited to go out on a hunt and we will be able to bag a lot of game."

The sixth son replied to the same question, "The time will be excellent for pounding paddy when you won't feel the exertion."

Finally, he asked his seventh son who bore the name Jagatala-pratapa. The latter replied, "Left to me, I would love to set out on a conquest of the entire world under the benign rays of this full moon. Not only will I succeed in conquering the world, but also will I go to the world of Devas and get hold of Indra's daughter whom I shall marry. I will make her offer me the *pan-supari*. I will make Agni's daughter shampoo my tired legs. I will make Varuna's daughter sing sweet music and Nagaraja's daughter fan me gentle breeze."

While the King listened to the replies of all the six sons coolly, he flew into a temper as soon as he heard the reply of the seventh son. Roared he, "You cad, aren't you ashamed of mouthing impossible things? Alternately, you are being very greedy. I have now known that it will be extremely dangerous to keep you in my domain. Nor would it help in extraditing you from this country, for you will turn out to be a menace to other countries and kings. I, therefore, am of the opinion that you deserve death at the hands of the executioners."

Saying this, he sent for the official executioners to whom he handed over his last son with orders to cut off his head without any compunction whatsoever.

News reached the Queen of the fateful decision in regard to her last son. She knew it was impossible to get the King to revoke his orders and any pleading on her son's behalf would only aggravate the King's anger and possibly make it recoil on her. The only course left to her was to think of a stratagem by which she could save her son's neck. She, therefore, took a thousand *mohurs* from her privy purse and tying them up in a bag, ran to the prison under cover and met her son Jagatalapratapa. Seeing him, she embraced him and shed copious tears at the miserable fate that awaited him. Said she at last, "My darling, your father has ordered your execution at dawn. I know of no other way than to ask you to escape from this prison. Look! Here are a thousand *mohurs*. Take them, jump the walls and run for your life. This is your only chance. I bless you!"

And she returned praying to God that no harm should befall her son.

Jagatalapratapa carried the command of his mother on his head and while the guards were asleep, jumped the precipitous walls and ran through forests as fast as he could.

Early in the morning, when the guards went inside, they found the prison cell empty! With broken hearts, they ran to the King and reported to him the escape of the Prince.

The King's fury exceeded all bounds but seeing that nothing else could be done, he gave peremptory orders to the effect that Jagatalapratapa should be beheaded any time anywhere he was caught.

The young Prince, who ran for his life throughout the night, reached a village by dawn. There the first thing he saw was a hamlet which was inhabited by an old woman. Seeing her, he bowed before her. The old woman asked him, "My son, who are you? And wherefrom have you come?"

Pratapa told her faithfully all about him and why he had to come away from his family.

The old woman pitied his condition and said, "My son, you can safely stay with me. I keep ten buffaloes. You can tend them. You can graze them. You can milk them. You can sell them. And you can partake of such food in my home and under my roof as I am able to provide. In short, you can live as my son without any fear. Now, before doing so, I want to tell you one thing. While taking out the cattle, you can go towards the East, West and Southern directions but not in the North. Do not forget. That is my only warning to you."

Pratapa had a stimulating bath in the brook running yonder, put on fresh garments and after partaking of the meagre breakfast provided by the lady, drove the cattle for grazing.

For the first three days, he took the cattle to the pastures situated in the three directions as directed by her. But on the fourth day, he had the itch to see what lay in the Northern direction which the woman had forbidden. Being adventurous by nature, he could not resist the temptation to defy the ban so lovingly put by the woman.

For a long time he was driving the cattle. But seeing nothing particular, he was wondering whether the old woman was trying to make a fool of him. Stationing the buffaloes under the cool shade of a thick *jambul* grove, the young Prince took shelter under a tree. He was admiring nature's beauty and tasting the sweet fruits falling from the tree above.

As he was aimlessly looking around, he saw, at some distance, a lake inlaid with the nine kinds of gems which appeared to dazzle in his eyes. He sat up with a jerk and wondered whether he was not dreaming. After wiping his eyes, he again looked around and there was no mistake about it.

Going nearer the lake, he looked at it more carefully. He saw four divine damsels disporting themselves in its water. One of them was unmistakably the daughter of Indra, judging from the accounts he had heard and read about her, the others being her maids. He further saw that she had stored away her wearing apparel in a corner of the steps leading to the water of the lake.

Without being seen, he crawled to the spot noiselessly, stole the apparel of Indra's daughter, and after crawling back to a safe distance, stood up and ran. But he was mistaken. Indra's daughter had noticed what was going on and she was therefore alarmed. What she did next was to run after him without anything on her body in quick steps and, as she came behind him, pleaded, "Look! Prince, look at me. Why do you feel shy?"

The Prince being young could not resist the temptation of looking back when, lo! Indra's daughter cursed him to become a lump of stone and there he stood as a stone-pillar! Having done it, the divine damsels left for their abodes.

The buffaloes returned home in the evening, but not the Prince. The old woman who thought at first that he had stayed behind and would soon follow was getting worried by his non-return even after a late hour. She waited till the break of the next day and then, too, the young Prince did not return. Confirmed in her suspicions, the old woman went in the Northern direction. When she came near the *jambul* forest, she found the telltale statue that was formerly the Prince. "O, Lord!" she exclaimed. "What I feared has happened. This boy has been cursed by Indra's daughter. Well, I know what to do."

So saying she returned home. And taking with her her magic wand and consecrated water, she came back to the place and after sprinkling the water on the statue, touched it with her magic wand. The Prince came back to life.

Falling at her feet, he said, "Mother, for three days I drove the cattle to the East, West and South, and on the fourth day, foolishly drove to the North. When I was eating the fruits of those trees, I saw a sparkling lake. When I went near it, I saw Indra's daughter sporting in its waters in the company of her maids. I tried to steal her clothes away without being seen, but she noticed this, ran after me and tempted me to look back at her. I did so and afterwards do not know what happened. I beg of you to forgive me for transgressing your orders.... Oh! What a beauty she was! Even now she appears to be standing before my eyes. Mother, you must help me to marry her. I don't think I have anybody in this world except you who could help me."

Greatly pleased, the old woman smiled and replied: "My son, do not fear. I shall help you in the fulfilment of your desire. Come home."

Followed by him, the old woman reached home and told him, "My son, tomorrow you go to the same place in the North. While Indra's daughter is again having her bath, steal her clothes and run to my house as before. She will run after you naked and tempt you to look back on her figure. This time, resolutely refuse to do so and keep on running till you reach my house. I will look after the rest."

As advised by the old lady, Pratapa drove the cattle to the same *jambul* forest on the next day. At the identical hour, he again saw Indra's daughter and her maids sporting in the waters of the lake. Once again, he stole her clothes and ran. Indra's daughter as before ran after him calling out to him to look back and admire her youth. But, he did not. She tried her best to induce him to do so, but Pratapa resolutely refused and kept on running, panting for breath.

As soon as he reached home, the old woman received the clothes he had brought, rolled them up into a bundle and concealed them in a pouch cut out of the thigh of the boy. With the clothes thus safely embedded, the old woman, by a magic spell, transformed the boy into a small child, put him on her lap and sang a lullaby. As she was thus fondling him, Indra's daughter entered her house.

Seeing the old woman, Indra's daughter asked her, "Mother, did you see a young man running this way taking away my *sari?"*

Replied the old woman, "I didn't see any young man running with your *sari.* Indeed, besides this child, I haven't set eyes on anyone else. Look! You have no clothes on and you are a grown-up girl. Please step inside and wear a cloth." And she gave her one.

Indra's daughter wrapped the cloth around her body and sat down beside her greatly disappointed.

Drawing her into conversation, the old woman said, "Oh, young one! You are yet unmarried and you say the person who stole your clothes was a young lad. I am sure that since he stole your clothes, he must have been enamoured of you. What makes you refrain from marrying him? Don't you know that young women are meant to be married? And don't you know that in the ultimate analysis women are bound to live with men as wives of husbands?"

In this manner the old woman brought the girl around to agreeing to marry the lad who stole her clothes and whom, apparently, the girl had liked. When she finally agreed to the proposition the old woman transformed the child on her lap back into the young Prince, whereon, the two of them looked at each other not unlovingly. Not wasting any further time, the old woman made them exchange rings and had them married on the spot under the *gandharva* system. The Prince and Indra's daughter found themselves swimming in the ocean of happiness.

22. THE NAG KANYA

For six months Jagatalapratapa lived happily with Indra's daughter and the old woman looked on them with parental joy. At the end of this period, the old woman, however, decided to set them up as a separate family and therefore, with the aid of her magic wand, conjured up a palace where she made the couple settle down.

Nevertheless, before the couple left for their new home, the old woman called Pratapa aside and told him, "My son, I want to tell you something in secret. If Indra's daughter manages to get back her wearing apparel, not only will she desert you but also take your strength away. Therefore, take good care to keep the apparel in a secure place and away from her. When, however, you go out hunting or to the warfront, don't carry it with you, but leave it in the custody of one you trust most and, on return, hide it in your thigh again. This is my last advice to you. Good luck."

The young couple lived in the new palace for some time, after which they decided to go far away and live in a new country. Together, therefore, they crossed dense forests, high mountains, deep ravines and what not, and reached a city called Visvanchitha. On arrival there, they saw at its entrance a lake distinguished for its pellucid water. Descending from their horses, they washed their hands and feet, drank the pure and clear water to their hearts' content and sat down beneath the cool shade of a big tree with thick foliage which stood nearby.

At that time, the minister of that State happened to pass that way and saw the young couple. So greatly struck was he by the beauty of the woman that he instantly decided that she deserved a choice corner in his master's harem. With that thought in mind, he ran post-haste to the King and said: "My lord, a few moments ago, I saw a woman sitting on the bank of the lake in front of our city. It is not possible for me, nor even for the thousand-tongued Adisesha, to describe the beauty of that princess. I have a strong feeling that she does not belong to this world, but comes from the other world. I, therefore, thought it fit to inform Your Majesty about her and suggest her inclusion in your harem."

Stirred, the King, who had a great fancy for women, immediately started for the place where the princess was. On the way, the minister said, "My lord, she is not alone. She is accompanied by a man who, I presume, is her husband. I do not therefore know how far it will be wise for us to achieve our object by straightforward means. I suggest to Your Majesty that you invite the man to join your service so that in course of time his wife may be taken into our custody."

The King agreed, and together they arrived at the place where the young couple were seated.

Reaching them as though by accident, the King asked Pratapa: "My dear man, who are you? Why are you sitting here? You may probably have learned that I am the King of this place. You may fearlessly tell me whatever you want to say."

"Your Majesty, I am a prince from another state. My name is Jagatalapratapa. In search of livelihood, I have come out into the wide world," replied Pratapa.

At this stage, the minister stepped forward and asked Pratapa: "Well, Sir, if that is so, do you have any objection to take up employment under the King of this country?"

"Can you offer me a salary of ten thousand gold *mohurs* per month?" asked Pratapa and the King agreed.

Gratified at this deal, Pratapa, after nodding in the direction of his wife, signified his acceptance.

Asking them to follow, the King and his minister led them into the city.

The minister carefully selected a cosy place for Pratapa and his wife to stay and made every arrangement to make their living comfortable. He then planted servants and maids of his own into that household.

Pratapa woke up very early in the morning. After his bath and *pooja,* he took his food and ate the *tambul* given by his wife. Dressing himself up appropriately, he went to the palace and started work as the personal bodyguard of the King. It was his duty to stand by the side of the King with a drawn sword till sunset when he would return home.

At the end of the month, the minister saw to it that the salary agreed upon was sent to Pratapa's residence through treasury officials. While they did so, he told them, "You know, at the moment Pratapa is in the palace standing beside the throne. Therefore, when you deliver this money at his home, see that you do take a good look at all that goes on in that house and report back to me."

Accordingly, when the officials tapped at the door of Pratapa's house, Indra's daughter sent one of her maids to find out who they were. When she heard that it was her husband's monthly salary that was being brought in, she came out and personally took possession of all the money, and after counting it, gave them a receipt after which she closed the door behind them.

When, therefore, the treasury officials reported how careful the folks at Pratapa's home were, the minister had no delusion about the magnitude of the task before him. He came to the conclusion that unless Pratapa was made short work of, it would not be possible for the King to obtain possession of the divine girl.

With this idea in mind, he came to the King and said: "My lord, from my experience of a month with your new aide and the tight safety measures taken by him at his home, I feel it is going to be a tough job for us to gain possession of his wife. I can think of only one way out, and that is, Pratapa should be disposed of by some subterfuge as otherwise our plan may not work at all. I have the scheme well thought out. It is this: Your Majesty may kindly feign very severe headache and I will put out the news that the *vaids* want the poison of Nagendra for its cure. I will as a matter of course ask your aide Pratapa to go and fetch it. I am quite sure that in trying to bring it, he is certain to be burnt down and will definitely not return alive. Thereafter, you can easily take possession of his wife."

The King patted his minister on the back for his ingenuity. Falling in with the suggestion, he went into his room and dropped down on his bed as if stricken by a very severe headache. *Vaids* flitted in and out of the palace, and the news, as pre-planned, was put out and it spread far and wide. The minister came running to aide Pratapa. In an apologetic tone he asked, "My dear Sir, our master is suffering from a severe headache and the *vaids* say that nothing but Nagendra's poison can cure him. And who can bring that if not you? Please, therefore, hurry up and save our King."

Pratapa doubted the truth or the genuineness of this statement just for a second only; but the next moment he decided that he should fetch that medicine at all costs. Promising, therefore, to quickly return, he went home.

The truism that the face is the index of the mind cannot find better applicability than in the case of the wife who can easily detect from the husband's face that all is not well in his mind just as surely as the mother can in the case of her child. When Indra's daughter, therefore, saw her husband look somewhat unusual, she asked him, "My lord, something seems to ail you now. I can see that from your face. Won't you please permit me to help you? I dare say something has happened in the palace which has upset you, and I do tell you that although a woman, I can still be of help in dispelling your gloom and setting your mind again at ease."

Looking at his wife for a moment and taking courage from the gleam of confidence visible in her eyes, Pratapa briefly told her all that had happened in the palace and the King's commission to him to bring Nagendra's poison. He did not however, at that time suspect foul-play.

Indra's daughter, on hearing this, smiled and said, "My lord, is that the reason for your gloom? I shall certainly help you get the poison but in the meantime, have your wash and food. Let us talk about the poison later."

Half-inclined to be sceptical, Pratapa however did what his wife desired him to do and by the time they settled down comfortably to eat *pan* after their meal, Indra's daughter pressed a chit into his hands with the following lines written on it:

"My dear Uncle,

The bearer of this letter is my husband. Please help him in his mission, and if you so feel, give him a daughter of yours too in marriage.

Yours sincerely,
Indra's Daughter."

And the letter was addressed to King Karkotaka, Lord of Serpents.

When Pratapa had finished reading the letter, she told him, "Take this letter, walk into a forest and thrust it inside any serpent-pit and wait there for what happens."

Greatly pleased, Pratapa took the letter and walked into the nearest forest. There he succeeded in finding a large snake-pit into which he thrust the scroll. It fell on the hood of a huge serpent which, noticing the address of the person to whom it was meant, hurried to the presence of Karkotaka, and gave it to him reverentially.

Karkotaka glanced through the letter and recognizing the signature, called his servants and ordered them to bring a palanquin made of pearl. He said to them, "Take this palanquin to the forest where this Nag will take you. At the mouth of its pit stands a Prince. Ask him to sit on this palanquin and bring him to my presence."

The servants, carrying the palanquin, hurried behind the Nag. When they arrived, Pratapa was greatly surprised. When the Nag-servants asked him to accompany them in that palanquin, he did so thinking that the rest of his journey was going to be just as fruitful.

Soon he was brought into the presence of King Karkotaka before whose feet he made obeisance. Karkotaka patted him fondly and after enquiring about his wife, asked him about the nature of his mission.

Said Pratapa: "Sir, my master, the King, wants an ampoule of cobra poison to cure him of his severe headache. I have, therefore, come to you at the suggestion of your niece, Indra's daughter. Please help me."

On hearing this Karkotaka laughed outright and said: "Oh, that is very simple. Let that wait. I have a happier function to perform now. Look! They are my daughters. Choose the most beautiful from among them and I am presently going to give her in marriage to you."

Pratapa selected one and, on the spot, she was made to marry him in a grand manner.

King Karkotaka gave Pratapa all sorts of gifts and at the time of his departure, also gave him in a securely-packed ampoule a small dose of cobra-poison.

Bidding him adieu, Pratapa returned to *bhooloka* with the *nag-kanya.*

By the time he arrived, the sun had set in the west. Stopping his retinue outside the precincts of the city, Pratapa entered his home in the company of his new bride. Indra's daughter received them and embracing the *nag-kanya,* took her inside, and all the three of them spent the night happily.

With the rise of the sun next morning, Pratapa got up, took his bath, did his morning ablutions, ate his food and after receiving the *tambul* from his wife, put on his official robes and went to the palace taking with him the ampoule of cobra-poison.

His familiar steps along the corridor of the palace sent jitters into the minister concerned who could not believe his own eyes at the sight of Pratapa, who could return alive from the Nag world. Probably, Pratapa could not have gone to the Nag world at all, he doubted. Anyway, he wanted to make sure of things.

As soon as Pratapa presented himself before the minister stating that he had brought the *nag*-poison, the minister brusquely told him, "Show me where it is."

Pratapa replied, "Sir, I have no objection to showing it to you. But its slightest exposure will burn this palace out. What shall I do?"

The minister agreed, and together they left the palace and went to a forest a few miles away from the city. On reaching the place, hardly had Pratapa slit open the cone of the ampoule when a whole mile of the forest lay burnt out.

Assured, therefore, that Pratapa was telling the truth, the minister returned to the palace and reported to the King.

They could not help praising Pratapa for his valour, and for a month more, he continued to work in the palace as the royal orderly.

At the expiry of that period, the minister, as usual, had Pratapa's salary counted and delivered at his home.

As on the previous occasion, this time too he gave instructions to the officials carrying the money to have a close look at the interior of Pratapa's home and report back to him.

When, accordingly, the officials tapped at the door of Pratapa's house, a maid admitted them inside. At that time both the wives of Pratapa came out and after counting the coins, gave them a receipt. The officials then returned to the palace and reported to the minister that now there were two damsels at Pratapa's home who were peerless in their beauty.

The King sighed.

23. VARUṆA'S DAUGHTER

THE news that now there were two extraordinarily beautiful women in Pratapa's home inflamed the King's lust, and the first thing, therefore, the latter did early next morning was to send for his minister and seek his counsel on the best means of whisking away those women into his harem.

The Minister, on his part, was far too wise to underrate the abilities of Pratapa who had already shown his ingenuity in accomplishing the impossible.

Giving the problem deep thought, the Minister replied: "Lord! There is practically no other way of achieving our end than by causing the death of Pratapa who, from his previous record, appears to pose a difficult riddle to us. I shall have the necessary authority. I shall send him on a more perilous mission this time, from which he is sure not to return. May I request Your Majesty to feign stomach-ache and I shall put out the news that the *vaids* require the meat of a whale which has its abode in the farthest reaches of the ocean. I am sure we will succeed this time."

"So be it!" replied the King.

News got around that the King was suffering from an excruciating stomach-ache and that nothing but a preparation out of the whale-liver from the deepest reaches of the ocean would cure him of it.

As on the previous occasion, the Minister approached Pratapa and said: "My dear Pratapa, you saved our King on a former occasion. Considering what he is now suffering from, the previous ailment was a flea-bite and all hopes of the King's recovery are centred on you. The royal physician wants the liver of a whale from the farthest reaches of the ocean. I cannot think of anyone other than you to bring it. On behalf of the King, may I request you to proceed on that mission at once?"

Pratapa, who became sceptical, nevertheless said that he would let the Minister know his reply definitely the following day.

When Pratapa returned home, he was engrossed in the thought as to how he could get hold of the whale. Seeing him thus immersed in thought, his two wives asked: "Lord! You seem worried. Won't you share your worries with us? Aren't we entitled to share your joys and sorrows?"

At this Pratapa laughed and replied: "My dears! Is there anything with me that doesn't belong to you and yet belongs to me? The Minister has posed another problem today. The King is sick and the *vaids* want the liver of the biggest available whale for the King's cure. They want me to bring it. How on earth should I set about it? I have promised to let the Minister have my reply tomorrow. That is the matter I was engrossed in."

Indra's daughter laughed outright at his admission of inability and said: "My love! Don't think that we two here are incapable of doing the near-impossible. Please forget all about it now; have your bath and sit down for dinner. Everything else must wait."

"All right, just as you please," replied Pratapa, a ray of hope lighting up his face.

That night the three of them slept as though the outside world didn't exist. Early next morning, Pratapa prepared himself, as usual, to start off for work when his first wife presented herself before him and handed him a letter which read:

"My dear Uncle Varuna,

The bearer of this note, Prince Jagatalapratapa, is my husband. For your information, he is also the co-husband of Nagaraja's daughter. He wants the largest whale for his official purposes. Would you mind presenting him with the best in your kingdom and if you so care, give one of your daughters too in marriage to him. You can count upon me too look after her. With love,

Indra's Daughter."

When Pratapa had finished reading it, she said: "Kindly take this scroll and drop it in the nearest ocean and wait for what happens."

By now Pratapa was sure that he was bound to succeed in his new mission if the previous letter was any precedent.

Pinching her cheek ever so lightly, Pratapa swung back and walked towards the palace jauntily.

Promising the Minister to return within a few days with the medicine, Pratapa left on his quest.

As soon as he was out of ear-shot from the city, Pratapa sought the nearest seacoast and finding it, threw the scroll just as instructed.

The fish which chanced to nibble at it was startled to find the letter addressed to its king, Varuna.

Holding on to it respectfully, the fish swam to the nearest marine government outpost, and passed the letter by the swiftest messenger on to the King who held court at Mount Udayagiri.

Recognizing the signature on the scroll, Lord Varuna read the letter lovingly and as soon as he finished reading it, despatched a hundred of his bodyguards to the spot where the letter was dropped with instructions to bring Prince Pratapa with due honours to his presence.

When, therefore, the whole party of royal fishes emerged to the surface of the sea to greet him, Pratapa was greatly surprised, for the reception far exceeded his anticipations.

As directed by them, he rode on their back and they took him to the presence of King Varuna so safely that not a single drop of water fell on Pratapa.

Varuna embraced Pratapa and entertained him to a lavish repast and, as the crowning part of it, gave him in marriage the most beautiful of his daughters along with loads of precious gems and gifts.

Directing his bodyguards to land him back safely at the place where they had originally picked him up, Varuna sent Pratapa back on the mightiest whale available in his kingdom.

As the whale on which Pratapa was riding was nearing the seacoast, its mountainous form sent roaring waves which threatened to engulf the city. Officials who noticed the approaching whale reported the matter to the King who, from the terrace of his five-storeyed palace, surveyed the object through his powerful binoculars when he found Pratapa riding on the gigantic whale.

Summoning his Minister to his presence, the King conveyed the news, whereon the Minister suggested: "Your Majesty! If the whale comes nearer, positive damage will be done to this city. In any case, Pratapa has proved himself equal to the task we have imposed on him. It would therefore be wise to stop him in mid-ocean and convey to him the news through royal fleet that the whale is no longer necessary; the King has been cured; the whale may be sent back!"

The King too agreed to the suggestion, thinking that discretion was the better part of valour and therefore issued orders to that effect.

When, therefore, Pratapa got the news mid-way, he despatched the whale to his father-in-law's kingdom and along with his new wife, who was covered from head to foot, got into the barge together with the precious gifts.

Reaching home, he entrusted his new wife to Indra's daughter who embraced her lovingly.

Spending the night wonderfully with all his three wives, Pratapa woke up early next morning as usual and went to his work.

At the palace, impotent anger greeted him, but nonetheless at the completion of the third month, the Minister, as usual, had Pratapa's salary sent to his home with the customary instructions.

When the messengers returned with the receipt, they had a story to tell: "Your Majesty! What shall we say? There is a third girl now who surpasses the first two in beauty! O, the three of them can very well rule the universe as the new trinity!"

On hearing this, the King was more than ever determined to grab all the three girls somehow or other, but had no very great opinion of his Minister judging from his last two efforts.

24. PRATAPA TEACHES A LESSON

IT required a lot of talking for the Minister to convince his King that he would definitely do away with Pratapa in the third attempt. In view of the object to be achieved, the King had perforce to agree to his Minister's offer and wait patiently for the result.

Said the Minister: "My lord, I propose to send Pratapa now on a more perilous mission than the previous two. From this he will never return. Your Majesty, the Minister for Home Affairs and I would each write a letter to one of our ancestors. Pratapa will be asked to carry these messages to them and return with their replies. Who knows whether our ancestors are in hell or heaven or elsewhere? How will he know? And even supposing he does, how will he go? I am sure that in this task he is going to perish, and his three wives will become ours. Please write your message."

Saying this, the Minister produced a palmyra scroll and an appropriate pen. The King scribbled his message and handed it to the Minister. The Minister too wrote his own letter to one of his ancestors, so also did the Minister's colleague to his. The Minister handed all the three letters to Pratapa and said: "Pratapa, here are some letters addressed to our ancestors. It is the desire of our King that you should personally deliver them to the addressees and bring back their replies."

Realising that it was the King's command and failure to comply with it would entail serious consequences, Pratapa took these letters and went home promising to report back.

Reaching there, he informed his first wife of his new commission.

Indra's daughter thought, "I had all along been under the impression that the King was really testing our husband and that he was now admiring his valour. But the latest commission appears to indicate that the King's desire is far from being so. On the contrary, the King seems to be too eager to do away with my husband's life. What could be his other intentions if it were not that? Surely, in that the King would have had other motives. And what possible or worse motive could there be than that of acquiring the three of us who have actually no counterparts in the whole kingdom? Somehow my intuition tells me that the King has an eye on us. And I can never fail in my second vision. Under the circumstances, there is no alternative but to mete out adequate punishment to the King and his accomplices."

Deciding upon a plan of action, she said to her husband: "My lord, please return to the palace and tell the Minister that you would be back on completion of your mission in eight days. Tell him also to make a huge bonfire on the evening of the eighth day for some sort of propitiation."

While Pratapa went to the palace to communicate this decision, Indra's daughter wrote out a letter as though coming from the ancestors of the King and his Ministers in reply to theirs. The letter ran:

"My dear descendants,

We are very happy to inform you that we lead the most luxurious lives in Heaven. We have excellent food, enjoy the company of excellent women, and have all possible conveniences and amenities. But we are sorry to note that you happen to lead wretched lives in what can adequately be described as hell proper. What pains us most is that you have become repositories of jealousy, hypocrisy, and positive crime against humanity. We bewail your lust-laden life. It is our prayer that at least in future you may give up those evil ways and lead righteous lives. However, we are very anxious to have a look at you. Please, therefore, make a trip to our abode of bliss. If you so prefer, you may continue to stay with us, or, if you decide otherwise, can return.

Your ancestors."

As soon as Pratapa returned, Indra's daughter told him: "My lord, this time I have a plan by which I am going to teach your King a good lesson. It is needless to tell you that in all the commissions assigned to you, his intentions, evil as they were, appeared different. That the King has his eyes on us—your wives—I have no doubt whatsoever now. Hence my present decision. You have to stay indoors for seven days from now and on the eighth evening, take the letter which I shall give you and proceed to the Cross Maidan where the bonfire will be blazing forth. You drop my letter into that fire and God Agni will present himself there. Without the least fear, plunge into the fire and wait for what happens."

On the eighth evening, just as pre-arranged, Pratapa walked towards the bonfire with the second letter. That letter ran as follows:

"My dear Uncle Agni,

The bearer of this letter is your brother's son-in-law. It is my wish that you receive him properly, treat him well, and right away give one of your daughters in marriage to him. You may depend upon me to take good care of her. After the marriage, please carry him in front of all the people assembled by the fire and leave him in the open."

The letter was signed by all the three wives of Pratapa.

Of course, Pratapa also carried in his vest-pocket the first letter purporting to be the ancestors' reply to the letters which the King and his Ministers had addressed to them.

When, therefore, Pratapa dropped his wife's letter to Uncle Agni into the fire and entered it nonchalantly, people stood petrified and eagerly awaited further developments.

Just as foretold by Indra's daughter, God Agni was waiting for Pratapa whom he received befittingly and to whom that very minute he gave in marriage the most beautiful of his daughters.

At midnight when all the people had gone to sleep, Pratapa, unknown to others, came out of the fire taking his new bride along with him. He then left her to the care of his three other wives and quickly returned to his place in the fire which to him was as cold as ice.

On the morrow, the King and his Ministers who had made sure that Pratapa would never come out of the huge fire, however, returned to the scene of the fire to make doubly sure that they were not wrong. Indeed, the whole city had assembled around that fire to see what was really a miracle. At midday, to the surprise of all assembled, God Agni came out of the fire holding Pratapa by his hand and left him outside.

Holding in his hand the reply purporting to have come from the ancestors of the King and his Ministers and followed by the King's guards and the huge crowd, Pratapa made his way to the palace where the King and his Ministers had already occupied their seats apprehending further trouble.

As soon as Pratapa handed over the reply to them, they hurriedly opened it and read the contents. Their first reaction was overwhelming joy in that their ancestors had responded to their message. The second was one of regret for their ill-conceived thought and action towards Pratapa. The third was to seek recompense by taking a trip to where their ancestors were. In this way, they thought of making amends for their folly and foul behaviour.

So, after hurried consultations, they called Pratapa to their presence and after apologising to him for the series of troubles they had put him to, made their collective request to arrange to take them to the abode of their ancestors. Pratapa agreed on the spot and asking them to wait for him the following evening by another huge fire lit for the purpose, went home to his wife for further consultations. Indra's daughter felt happy that her plans were maturing according to her wishes and consequently she gave him another chit to her uncle, God Agni. That chit read as follows:

"My dear Uncle,

As you know, the bearer of this letter is now your direct son-in-law. He is bringing with him a few people. Please receive them all but leave your son-in-law alone. And burn the rest.

Indra's Daughter"

Carrying this letter with him, Pratapa went to the scene of the fire where the King and his two Ministers were waiting for him. In their anxiety to see and please their ancestors, they had brought with them numerous presents, a large quantity of fruits and other edibles.

Seeing them all, Pratapa asked them to hold him by the hand and come behind him. He entered the fire throwing the chit given by his first wife into it. God Agni who saw the note, quickly recognized his son-in-law and burnt the rest as directed.

When Pratapa came out alone, the people surrounding the fire got quite anxious. Addressing them in a forceful way, Pratapa explained to them the evil designs of the King and his Ministers on him and his family and concluded: "I have punished them for their evil designs as they fully deserve."

When the people heard this version, they all acclaimed "Pratapa-ki-jai" and literally carried him to the palace where they proclaimed him as their new King taking into account his unsurpassed valour in all his undertakings.

But Pratapa would not agree. On his persuasion, the people of the city agreed to accept another person who happened to be Jagatalapratapa's Deputy in office. So, after personally supervising the coronation of the Deputy as the King of that country, Pratapa advised the people to keep to righteous ways whatever happened and after personally instructing the administration of the kingdom for about a week, he left the city in the company of his four wives.

In the course of their travel, they came across an arid desert which made his first wife, Indra's daughter, smile. Seeing her do so, Pratapa asked her, "My love, what makes you smile unaccountably? I don't think anything is funny here."

Replied she: "My lord, you didn't catch my point. It just struck me that if I had the will, I could make this arid desert the most alluvial and rich plain, and if so needed, raise a positively handsome city on it—more beautiful than even my father's."

PRATAPA: "Very true indeed, my love. Don't I know that you are Mother Goddess in reality? It is a chance happening, and I cannot account for it, that you are my wife. I dare say that by a fiat of your will you can do what you say."

INDRA'S DAUGHTER: "My lord, I quite appreciate your compliment, but I think there is a touch of scepticism in your statement, if I mistake not."

On hearing this, Pratapa laughed uproariously and said: "Oh, no. That was never intended. I just made it appear so."

INDRA'S DAUGHTER: "But, my lord, nevertheless, I am going to demonstrate to you that I never brag, and I mean what I say. Would you be a witness to it?"

PRATAPA: "I would love to."

At the next moment, the arid desert became a valley of flowers, trees and the seat of lovely mansions touching the heavens. The moon and the stars vied with one another in beautifying its waters. Pratapa's four wives vied with one another in enhancing the loveliness of the place.

Indra's daughter coronated Pratapa as the King of that city. Naga's daughter beautified the city with gardens and other rich flora and fauna. Varuna's daughter made the city overflow with sweet water and also provided it with plenty of lakes and ponds with lovely blossoms where women could disport themselves. She further caused deep ditches to be dug around the city to make it impregnable. Agni's daughter provided it with the traditional four-fold forces with all their paraphernalia.

Thus, Pratapa, in course of time, became one of the greatest monarchs of the world commanding the allegiance of innumerable kings. At the same time, his domestic life continued to be an unmixed blessing.

25. PRATAPA IN A SOUP

WHILE Pratapa was ruling over the empire thus enchanted and enriched by his wives, King Lokadhipa, his father, and the members of his family, were toiling for their daily bread.

The King of Ushtra, a rival, had invaded Lokadhipa's domain and had driven him and his family away.

Thus exiled, Lokadhipa and his family had no option but to labour hard for a living. Accordingly, they began to sell firewood daily, gathering it from the forest and disposing it of in the city. And for quite a long time did they continue this practice.

One day, a passing stranger, however, told them that firewood fetched a better price in the newly created city where Pratapa ruled. Consequently, all of them—the old King, the old Queen and all their sons—went there with their loads of firewood.

On reaching the city, they dispersed themselves in different directions. Each one of them went to a different part. The aged mother, however, went to a place near the royal palace. The day was very hot and stuffy. The old woman, unable to bear the oppressive heat and the weight of her load and overcome by fatigue, fainted on the road.

As she fell down, Pratapa, who happened to be looking out of his balcony, saw her. And, out of commiseration, he rushed out to offer her help, but the moment he saw her face, he was shocked, for he discovered that this woman was none other than his own mother, and her condition, in which he had least expected to see her, gave him even a greater shock.

Losing no time, Pratapa sent word to his wives to run up to him in the street. By the time they arrived, he himself had carried his mother to a shelter. Fanning gentle breeze and sprinkling cold water on her face eased her fatigue and restored her strength when she started to slightly open her eyes. He then gave her some water to drink which she sipped slowly. By that time, Pratapa's queens were by her side. He intimated to them by signs that the old woman was really his mother. On learning this, all the four queens vied with one another in attending upon their mother-in-law.

As soon as the old woman regained sufficient strength to talk, she asked the four ladies: "You seem to be divine children, dears, but why do you take the trouble of attending on me, a woodcutter? I thought I was going to be spared further humiliation in this life but. . ."

Without allowing her to complete the sentence, Pratapa's queens carried her to the palace. There they started showering their attention on her. In the course of their talk, however, the girls asked her: "Mother, why do you speak so dejectedly? Have you had any misfortunes in life?"

"Misfortunes?" replied she. "The magnitude of my suffering you won't be able to conceive of. You must know that I was once a queen of a large kingdom, but my husband, Lokadhipa, my six sons and I were driven out of our dominion by a rival king. Since then, it has been our lot to eke out our existence by selling firewood."

Pratapa, who was listening to this heart-rending story from behind a curtain, could not contain himself any longer.

He, therefore, rushed out, fell at his mother's feet, and prayed: "Mother! Such a painful lot to befall you while I, your youngest son, am still alive!"

The old Queen looked at Pratapa's face and easily recognized in him her lost son. So, for a while, the mother and the son wept over their separation.

Pratapa then said: "Now, tell me, mother, where my father is, also where my brothers are."

The old Queen: "They must be roaming about in the streets of this city selling firewood, and I guess they are looking for me."

Pratapa immediately sent his officials out to comb the city-streets for his father and brothers. Very soon, all of them were found and brought to the palace. Pratapa received them and took them all to where the old Queen was seated.

On seeing the old King, the Queen broke down. Then, pointing out to Pratapa as her long-lost son, she explained, amidst tears, the circumstances of his escape.

While Pratapa's brothers seemed happy at this turn of events, the old King did not appear quite so pleased.

After food and rest, the family gathered together again. At that time, the old King related the story as to how he was reduced to his present position. He ended by saying. "Wealth and monarchy never stay permanently."

Soon, Pratapa abdicated in his father's favour, who became the King of the new state. However, he and his brothers assisted the old King in administering the State.

One day, as they were all seated together, Pratapa explained to a select audience how he happened to drift away from his parents. Narrating the incidents arising from the old King's questions to his sons in the moonlit night, he said: "When my father asked me what I would have liked to do in that glorious night, I said I would have Indra's daughter by my side to give me *pan supari* to eat; Varuna's daughter to shampoo my legs; Nagaraja's daughter to fan me; and Agni's daughter to sprinkle rose-water on me. On hearing this, my father thought I was a vain boaster and an undesirable character. So, he ordered that I should be killed. Thanks to my mother, I was able to escape that fate. Now, by the grace of God, I have the satisfaction of having those very four girls for serving me."

As he heard this, the old King got furious. He said, "I don't want to hear any more of your boasting; I would much rather leave this place."

Alarmed, Pratapa fell at his father's feet and sought his forgiveness. Pratapa also promised the old King that he would vanquish the Ushtra King who had overrun his parent's country and restore it to his father.

This assurance pleased and pacified the old King and the family lived together in amity.

One day, the brothers invited Pratapa for a hunt in the forest. So, before proceeding, Pratapa wanted to leave the wearing apparel of Indra's daughter in safe custody. Thinking things over, he decided to entrust the great treasure to the care of his mother till his return. While doing so, he said: "Mother, take care not to keep it anywhere down; always hold it in your hand and don't part with it for any reason."

Indra's daughter, however, came to know that her wearing apparel was now in the custody of her mother-in-law. Immediately, she called the other three co-wives together, and all the four of them gathered round the old Queen and started flattering her. This flattery went into the mother-in-law's head and she felt beside herself.

"What is it under your arm you are trying to hide from us, mother?" asked Indra's daughter.

"O, that's nothing; it's just a wearing apparel my son has asked me to keep in safe custody for him."

"That's all right. But can't I have a look at it?" Indra's daughter again asked.

"Yes, if you must; but you must return it to me."

"Of course, I shall. Isn't this lovely, sisters?"

"Very lovely," said they in chorus.

"How beautiful shall I look in it!"

"Surely, like an angel," replied the woman unwittingly.

"Mother, will you permit me to wear it just for a second, please? I will certainly return it to you as soon as I have worn it."

The old woman couldn't say "no". So, Indra's daughter got her apparel back. The moment she wore it, she uttered: "Sankara!" In an instant all the four divine damsels flew into the sky and reached Devaloka while the new capital of Pratapa and everything else that went with it vanished into the thin air, leaving Pratapa and his family as poor as castaways. In the forest too Pratapa experienced the effect of the catastrophe. Even the chargers, he and his brothers rode on disappeared, and so did Pratapa's royal attire.

And all of this made Pratapa suddenly realise and deplore the fatal mistake his mother had committed.

26. PRATAPA MAKES A SECOND BID

IT was not difficult for Pratapa to divine the cause of the sudden transformation. He had little doubt that his capital and all those that went with his erstwhile royalty should have vanished into thin air. The cause lay, he was clear in his mind, in his mother who should have parted with the wearing apparel which he had entrusted to her care, with specific instructions not to part with it under any circumstances.

By that time Pratapa's brothers too, divested of their paraphernalia, stood before him enquiringly.

After explaining to them summarily the circumstances leading to this catastrophe, Pratapa returned to his capital followed by his brothers.

The capital, as he had expected, had once again become the arid desert which it was. Looking about, he saw his aged father and mother languishing on a patch of green. It was a double tragedy for them; for, when they had just recovered their royalty, they had to lose it again.

Asked Pratapa his mother: "Mother, why did you give that apparel to Indra's daughter?"

"O, my son! How do I know we shall come to this state?" She wept. Continuing she said: "When you left, she must have sensed what you had done and so she started flattering me. How can I refuse to hand it over, because it was only for a short while? But when she had it, all of them vanished and along with them, all our royalty! O, why did you marry those witches?"

Consoling her, stating that no one was to be blamed but his own fate, Pratapa led his parents and brothers to the kingdom where he had formerly served and which he had willingly given away to his assistant.

Reaching the palace gate, he sent the following message to the King through the gatekeeper: "Tell your King that Pratapa who gave you this kingdom waits at your door along with his family."

The sepoy duly communicated the message, when the King asked: "Is he come on a carrier or on foot?"

"On foot, Your Majesty!" replied the sepoy.

"In that case, tell him that I am very busy and cannot see him now. If he does not move away on hearing this, collar him out of the city."

The sepoy returned and told Pratapa: "Sir, our King is very busy presently and said he could not possibly see you. So you had better go away."

Pratapa could only laugh hoarsely and explain to his brothers: "I made this fellow King of this place because he served me faithfully. Now when he has tasted the power of royalty, he would not care to talk to me, especially when I am powerless."

The family then moved away to a neighbouring village, and seeking its headman, Pratapa said: "Sir, we are a royal family and due to a misfortune are reduced to this state. Will you do me a favour? Will you keep my aged parents and brothers with you for a few days till I return?"

The official smiled and said: "My son, don't you know that even dried-up lime and *pan* are useful at times? Don't you worry. I shall keep them. But first of all, have your bath and have some grub here."

"Thank you so much," said Pratapa; "I have vowed not to take any food till I achieve my object of recovering my lost glory. It would be enough if you extend this hospitality to my people here."

"Have it your way and I wish you the best of luck," replied the official. Pratapa bidding good-bye to all started on his journey to meet the old woman who put power into his hands.

On the first lap of his journey, Pratapa saw a heap of ants being washed away by a forest stream and heard the head of the ant-herd sending out an S.O.S. to him in its own language for help, promising repayment for services rendered.

Pratapa who knew the language of birds, beasts and insects smiled on hearing it, but with pure humanitarian motive, he threw a large leaf across the stream whereon the struggling ants clambered and which he later threw ashore, thus reclaiming them from certain death.

As he proceeded further, he heard near a patch of water the croak of a toad being mollified by an eagle, calling for help and promising service in return.

Wondering how many beings were in need of help, he saved the toad from its persecutor and dropped it inside the water.

Further on, he saved a worm from dying on a waterless track and placed it back in a marshy place for it to survive.

By the time he reached the cottage of the old woman who first gave him power, he was so down and out by hunger and thirst that he fell down unconscious. Unfortunately the woman was not in at that hour and so he was oscillating between life and death.

When she returned, she was startled to see Pratapa in that condition. She felt his pulse; finding it beating feebly, she gave him some strong decoction and subsequently milk. Under her care, he recovered consciousness and when he was in a fit condition, Pratapa related to her all that had happened to him during the interval. He ended saying: "Mother, I have come here under the vow of recovering all my lost glory with your help."

The old woman smiled understandingly and said: "My son, I can of course restore you to those four girls, but I am afraid they may lay a curse on you. Wait; I have some plan by which you can circumvent it. Listen, there is a holy fig tree by the side of the lake where those divine damsels come to disport themselves. If you offer them prayers seating yourself with undivided attention beneath this tree, I am sure you will achieve your object. May God bless you!"

Pratapa accordingly proceeded to the spot and, finding the holy tree, seated himself comfortably beneath its shade and started *tapas*.

Those four damsels no doubt came down as usual to the lake for sporting, but they hardly paid any attention to Pratapa whose presence could not have been lost on them.

For forty days Pratapa continued his *tapas* without taking food or water. Finally Pratapa came to the conclusion that inasmuch as his former wives did not even care to look at him, his life was not worth living. So with the name of Lord Hari on his lips he decided to put an end to it.

As he uttered the holy names Govinda, Achyuta, the divine damsels looked at each other. They suddenly sensed Pratapa's intentions. Said one: "Even on the very first day I could recognise him and guess his object, but lest you should mock me, I kept quiet." All of them quickly agreed that should the Prince die on their account, they would be held liable to untold sins.

So all of them rushed towards Pratapa who had fallen in a swoon. One of them pulled his head over her lap. Another brought some water from the pool which she dripped down his clenched teeth and the third fanned his face gently with her apron while the fourth looked on imploringly.

When as a result of their solicitude Pratapa opened his eyes, he smiled on seeing them. Said he at last, "My dears! When you saw me for forty days praying for you without food and water, how possibly could you steel your hearts against me? What harm have I done you? You have no warm corner for me, your husband? When you suddenly returned to Swarga I was like the man high up on a tree whose branches have suddenly given way."

The women too becoming uncomfortable replied: "Do not think we are so hard-hearted as all that. We too felt broken at first but later on reconciled ourselves to our lot. Don't forget we are immortals and our ways must necessarily fork out differently. Let us realise it now and forget all about the past and go our ways."

PRATAPA: "O damsels! Is it for hearing this verdict that I underwent all these toils? It looks like killing a man again after reviving him. In fact, it would be far better for you to make an end of my life here itself before you leave." And he caught hold of their hands.

Alarmed at this, they said: "O Prince! You would not listen to stark facts. Now we undertake to take you to heaven before Indra. If you have the power to convince the Lord of the Devas, you may have your way. This is the most we can do."

Pratapa agreed, whereon Indra's daughter converted him into a toad and placing him inside a pitcher she was carrying, took him to Swarga.

There, restoring him to his original form, they fed him and provided him with excellent clothes and a magic sword and sent him to Indra's presence.

27. PRATAPA REGAINS HIS KINGDOM

LEFT by the four girls at the gate of Indra's palace, Pratapa put on the best airs he could command and entered Indra's presence brandishing his magic sword. Indra being most powerful had normally no such experience of a mortal intruding upon his presence unceremoniously. He could not at the same time dismiss Pratapa as a maniac, for, the latter had the bearing of a powerful king. The best course, therefore, Indra decided, would be to listen to him. So he cocked a questioning glance at Pratapa.

Instinctively Pratapa took the initiative and said: "Devendra! They say you are lord of lords and king of kings, but it is in your kingdom that great sins are being committed!"

"Who are you, young man and what is your complaint?" asked Indra.

"I am a King and belong to the earth. One day I met your daughter on the earth when she was bathing in a lake. Falling in love with her I took hold of her wearing apparel and for a full year we lived as husband and wife. I further married the daughters of Nagaraja, Varuna and Agni. I created a new kingdom and ruled over it. One day when I went out on a hunting expedition I left your daughter's wearing apparel in the custody of my mother. Would you believe it? Your daughter robbed my mother of that apparel and all four returned here after razing down my kingdom. When I went deep into *tapas* for forty days for recovering them, these girls saw me on the point of death, picked me up, comforted me and made me recover. When I did so, they transformed me into a toad which they dropped in a water-pot and vanished! What sort of rule prevails in your kingdom that permits women to play the wanton with lives of individuals like me? I have not come here to arraign you for your lapses. All that I want is to point out your duty to get all the four girls duly married to me and sent with me."

Indra who was greatly impressed by the peroration of Pratapa sent for the four girls and questioned them. They confirmed Pratapa's statement in every detail and so Indra said: "Young man, I have no objection to give my daughter in marriage to you right now. But if you want the other three girls too, I shall have to subject you to a test for each of them. If you succeed in them, you shall have them too. What do you say?"

PRATAPA: What have I to say except that I submit to your decision?

Calling some Devas, Indra ordered them to till an acre of land deep and sow fifteen measures of sesame seeds and spread a hundred cart-loads of mud over it all. When that was complete, he called Pratapa and said: "Look, I have sown fifteen measures of sesame in this field. If you recover them without loss of a single sesame, I shall give you Naga's daughter in marriage to you. Not otherwise."

Pratapa who heard this was stunned. Nevertheless he went near the spot and took out a handful of mud. He found the seeds mixed with mud indistinguishably. He was nearly broken of heart and regretted his rashness in agreeing to any test. As he sat there dejected, he saw an ant passing by him. This gave him an idea. 'The ants can surely collect the seeds. Suppose I take advantage of the promise made by the ant-King to be of service to me whenever I wanted!' So he contemplated on the ant-King, and within a few moments there was a swarm of ants at his feet. Said the ant-King: "My friend, command me and we shall do all we can!"

PRATAPA: My dear friend! Here in this field have been sown fifteen measures of sesame seeds. Indra has challenged me to recover them all without loss of a single seed. Who can do that except you and your friends. Can you help me?

The ant-King called for a further contingent of ants of all descriptions all of which entered the field like an army. Very soon they had gathered the sesame seeds in a mound. Within an hour all the scattered seeds had been recovered. After assuring that not a single seed was left, the ant-King took leave, satisfied that he had been able to requite a good turn.

Pratapa thereupon waited on Indra and said: "Sir, I have recovered the sesame seeds, you may come and see for yourself."

Indra could not believe his ears, for it was a task too difficult for human, so he was convinced that Pratapa was really great. Said he: "Congratulations, young man. You win. Now how about the second test?"

"I am ready, Indra" replied Pratapa.

"Look, I shall drop my ring of insignia into this well. If you recover that, I shall give you Varuna's daughter in marriage!" He flung the ring as he said it.

Pratapa descended into the well and no sooner was he half way down did he encounter monstrous hisses and menacing hoods of a hundred serpents! Not allowing himself to be outdone, Pratapa slew each of them with his magic sword but each serpent slain multiplied into a dozen with the result that he had to retrace his steps.

When he sat on the wall of the well thinking about the next step, he heard the cackling of a toad near about. This brought to his mind the promise made by a toad to which he had done a good turn some time back. He therefore went near it and said: "Toad, a member of your species was kind enough to promise to help me for a small help I had rendered him. Now I am in difficulty."

That toad sent an s. o. s. to its King who appeared on the spot and said: "Sir, I am ready. Command me."

Pratapa related how Indra had challenged him to recover the ring he had thrown into the well and how it was infested by innumerable serpents and how they multiplied when he killed them.

The frog-King called a large number of toads. All of them jumped into the well. When the serpents were engaged in devouring them, a little toad dived into the water, picked up the ring and restored it to Pratapa unnoticed. Pratapa took the ring and gave it back to Indra who complimented Pratapa.

Asked how he managed to retrieve the ring, Pratapa told him the truth, whereupon Indra said: "Help rendered unto the smallest of creation will not go unrewarded." Indra restored the lives of all the frogs that lost them in the effort to help another being and gave them an abode in a nice lake near his *loka*.

Indra put Pratapa to another test. Indra cleverly concealed seven plantain stems in one and asked Pratapa to cut in two with one sweep of his sword. His hope was that, thinking it was but one plantain, Pratapa would use minimum force in wielding the sword which would thus get stuck. He could thus be disqualified.

The four girls who were witnesses to this test feared inwardly that Pratapa might miscalculate, so they ardently prayed that his stroke should be sufficiently forceful. The expression on their faces did not however escape the notice of Indra. As luck would have it, seven different stems fell out of the thrust made by Pratapa's sword.

Indra had one more trick in his bag. He made by his power all the four girls look exactly alike in form as well as dress. Calling Pratapa he said: "Now Pratapa, if you pick out my daughter from this quartet, all the four are yours and not otherwise."

Not knowing what to do, Pratapa looked down when he saw a worm passing by. He thought of the help promised by one of its species. So he told the worm in its language: "I did a good turn to one of your kind and he promised to help me. Now I am in a fix. If you can point out Indra's daughter, I shall be greatly obliged."

The worm turned back, started ascending the foot of Indra's daughter whereupon Pratapa seized the girl by her hand. Indra beamed.

Indra thereupon gladly gave all the four girls away in marriage to Pratapa and sent them back to the world with rich presents.

Pratapa went straight to the old woman who had been his guide and protector. After gaining her blessing he went to where his parents and brothers lived and after expressing his gratefulness to the man who had given them shelter, he returned to his erstwhile capital which had become a barren desert. With the help of the divine damsels he recreated his capital.

Soon after, he proceeded to the city whose King and former assistant refused to see him. That King died on the spot when he heard that Pratapa was coming with his army. Pratapa handed over the rule of the city to the gentleman who gave shelter to his family during the time of his distress.

After some time, Pratapa led his army to his father's capital. The usurpers on hearing that he was on the march, fled. Handing over the ancient capital to his commander-in-chief Pratapa returned to his new capital and ruled there in the company of his parents and celestial wives.

When Chaturya came to the end of the story, it was near daybreak. So he told the princess by his side: "Princess! Don't you think you must marry a prince of Pratapa's calibre? Now it is time for you to get moving".

The Princess left the nuptial chamber not unhappily.

28. THE DIVINE MANGO

It was the sixth day. Chaturya slept during the best part of the day so as to be ready for the night.

At nightfall Chaturya took his meal and dressing himself appropriately went up to the nuptial chamber which was decorated like Indra's abode. Seating himself on a couch he thought for a moment how best he could spend the night when the latch turned softly. It was the turn of the younger Princess and as her profile appeared against the background of the dull light, she looked a peach. Chaturya could not help looking at her figure steadily.

The Princess came near him, placed the tray on the couch and after touching his feet reverently took the *veena* on which she played a tune that could have melted even Parameshvara. She then danced a couple of sequences by which time her tempo had risen. When ultimately she whirled round him in embrace, Chaturya said: "Tarry, my dear. Listen to this engrossing story first and let us sleep later."

Like a lamb the Princess sat before him when Chaturya told the following story.

The King of Brinda had no issues for a long time. On the advice of the learned pandits he performed innumerable *dharmic* acts. One day a sage came to his palace. The King received him with due respects and after properly feeding him submitted: "Great Sage! By God's grace, I am having an excellent country to rule and my subjects love me as their father. But I have one great sorrow and that is I have no child to call my own and to whom I can hand over this kingdom when I retire. Kindly advice me on what I should do to overcome this sorrow."

The sage replied: "Brinda, as a result of certain past sins, you will have to suffer worse calamities soon. Late in life, however, you will be blessed with two sons."

"I am so happy, Sage, that I shall be blessed with children; I do not mind any calamity that might befall me. Even if I lose this kingdom, I won't mind!"

"Exactly," said the sage. "Some years hence, you will be driven out of this country and along with your wife, you will have to earn your living by doing menial work. But at the end, I can assure you, God will bless you!"

King Brinda happily looked forward to that day when he would be driven from his country! His *dharmic* activities increased day by day. His people however had little knowledge of the King's fate or they would have felt it as their own.

According to the King's horoscope Saturn's *mahadasa* started. Not long after, a neighbouring King who had been on friendly terms quite unexpectedly turned against Brinda and drove him out overnight in a coup. King Brinda and his wife had to run into the forest to escape being caught and imprisoned by the enemy.

They trudged along for many days in uncharted domain till at last they reached a far-off place. The royal couple were so exhausted that they fell down in front of a merchant's house. The merchant's wife being a kind woman seeing their condition gave them food and clothes.

Soon the couple were employed in the same household. The ex-Queen served in the kitchen while the ex-King tended the garden and did other odd out-door duties. In spare hours he went out into the forest, brought firewood and sold them in the market to make a few extra annas. In all these, the two exiles did not feel the least regret. They were looking for the day prophesied by the sage, part of which had already come true.

After a few years of service in the merchant's household, the ex-Queen became *enceinte*. One could not say which of the couple was happier. The ex-King, finding his wife advanced in pregnancy, improvised a hut in front of a dilapidated house at the far-end of the street where he kept her for the confinement while he himself did extra duty to make up the income. Soon the ex-Queen delivered a boy who bore all the 32 marks of kingship. It was then that the ex-King felt his poverty. He was greatly agitated that he could not buy the barest of necessities for his beloved wife and son. What a difference!

The merchant's wife who heard of the birth of a boy to her ex-servant, came to have a look at the child. Pitying the condition of the poor woman, she undertook to look after her well till she became fit again. That took a great load off the ex-King's mind. Soon the couple resumed the work in the merchant's own house. After three years, another boy was born to them. He too was of royal mien. Between them, the ex-King and ex-Queen worked hard to give the children a good education.

The boys came of age. One day the younger boy said to his elder brother: "Brother! It pains me to see our parents toiling so hard to give us a living. Don't you think it is time we relieved them of their bother and supported them?"

"Yes brother. What shall we do?"

Between them the brothers agreed that they should stretch out their legs and earn well and support their parents. Deciding on travelling they begged before a few houses and getting a couple of measures of rice, took them to their mother and said: "Mother! Please prepare this into food that will take us for a few days. I and brother are going out of the city in search of job. We shall return soon and relieve you of all further toil!"

The mother would not hear anything about it. When the father arrived, she told him. The couple felt themselves at their wit's end. But the boys were adamant. The father and mother wept at the prospect of having to separate from their beloved children whom they got after so much trouble. However the ex-King recalled the Sage's prophecy and consoled himself that it was all for the best. Did not Rama go to the forest?

The two sons bade adieu to their parents and left. They had to cross a huge forest. Their resolve made them oblivious of fear; they trusted in God and briskly walked forward during the day and slept on tree-tops at night.

One day as they were proceeding along a narrow path, they saw a huge mango tree which bore a solitary fruit. It was so luscious that the youngsters felt it would very well augment their food. So the younger boy climbed up the tree, plucked the fruit and wrapping it in his food parcel walked along.

The mango tree was a divine tree. It bore one fruit once in a hundred years. It had divine powers. An ascetic had been doing penance under that tree all those years coveting to pluck it. At the time the youngsters had been passing that way, he had gone for his bath in a nearby pool. When therefore he returned and found the fruit missing, he was aghast. He felt a hundred years of watch had slipped through his fingers. He ran helterskelter looking for the man who had plucked it. Soon he overtook the lads. He asked them: "Did you by any chance pluck a mango fruit from a tree on the way?"

"Why?" asked the younger boy. "There are many mango trees which are full with fruits. Why should you be so keen on one tree?"

"O, my boy! If you knew its properties you wouldn't ask that way. Whoever eats the fruit of that tree will become an emperor, and whoever partakes of its kernel will spill out costly gems when he laughs! I have been at it for a hundred years now and all my labour is wasted, for, I find it missing!"

"O! Is that so? You may search us if you like," repeated the lad.

The ascetic could not see the fruit in their hands or clothes, it being folded pat in the food-parcel. So he went back thoroughly disheartened.

The two youngsters had a hearty laugh behind the old man's back. They honestly believed that he was a lunatic, for whoever would wrangle for one mango fruit while the forest was full of them? Yet in the heart of hearts they had a lurking fear that after all there might be some truth in the statement. They did not therefore want to take any chances.

The ascetic on the other hand had to lose it at the last moment because, his *tapas,* if it can be called one, had a desire motive. Rather it was an instance of the devil guarding a treasure.

When the two brothers felt tired, they sat by the side of a running brook and ate their meal from out of the parcel their mother had given them. The younger boy took out the tell-tale mango fruit and gave the fleshy part to his brother to eat and himself ate a little out of the kernel and relaxed in the shade of a tree.

At the other end of the forest lay a city called Veera-Ghanta and its King Veera Martanda had just died issueless. Before his death he had instructed his ministers to choose that person as his successor whom the state elephant would voluntarily garland.

So, after the cremation, the ministers gave a garland to the state elephant which, holding it in its trunk, went about the city. Many were the heads that proffered themselves for the honour, but the elephant would not look at them. At last it entered the forest followed by the ministerial paraphernalia.

On reaching the place where our two youngsters were relaxing, the elephant sought out the elder boy and placing the garland squarely on his neck, lifted him up and placed him on its back while the ministers acclaimed him as the next King.

The officials explained to the boy the circumstances of the choice and on his agreeing to become the King, took him to the city in royal procession and at an auspicious time coronated him as the King to the joy of all citizens. While he started ruling the kingdom justly, the younger boy was left alone in the forest.

29. THE YOUNGER PRINCE AT LARGE

DESTINY works in strange ways. While one may see in it the helping hand, others may see in it a serpent and experience its concomitant fear. Perhaps it is inherent in it and destiny meant it that way.

When the royal elephant voluntarily placed the garland on the elder brother's neck and hoisted him aloft with its trunk for an exalted purpose, the younger brother saw in it the hand of death and without caring even to pause or look back, fled into the jungle convinced all the while that his brother was killed by a rogue elephant pursued by a party of shikars.

When he thought he was at a safe distance, he paused and looking back, shed copious tears crying: "O, my beloved brother! Is it for losing you that we started from home? How shall I answer our father and mother? How indeed shall I move alone in this vast world without your help? O, brother!"

Consoling himself in many ways, the younger brother walked ahead, reaching a city by nightfall. He was greatly fatigued by hunger and thirst. As he walked along the streets of the city, he saw a large mansion where he thought he might beg with success. So, ascending its steps, he knocked at the door when a maid appeared to whom he said: "Mother, I have had no food for three days. I am hungry. Will you give me a morsel?"

That mansion happened to belong to a prosperous danseuse of the city and when the maid saw the thirty-two oyal marks on the young beggar's person, she called her head mistress from inside and whispered her findings into her ears. The head mistress of the house was an old woman who was well versed with the ways of the world. She was a connoisseur of men and nothing would escape her shrewd eyes. At the very first look she sized the young man up to be of royal stock but could not at once account for his present condition. She held the view that everything on God's earth had its own use provided one tapped it at the right time and place. She would not discard even a broken screw, unless she was convinced after a period of waiting and watching, it was absolutely of no use. Persons of royal origin could never depreciate in their intrinsic value. The conch does not lose its whiteness even after being roasted by fire. She concluded that she could put him to good use.

So, she smiled at him, took him inside the house, gave him a wash and fed him sumptuously. The old woman's daughter who was the most sought-after danseuse of the place, cultivated the young man's friendship with the object of knowing all about his past and future plans.

One day in the course of a conversation the danseuse said something funny which made the young prince laugh. It may be recalled that as a result of eating the kernel of the divine mango-fruit, the prince had acquired the faculty of spilling valuable gems from his smiles. So he spilled them. The old woman who was witness to the phenomenon rushed towards him and artfully collected them all in her hand. While she picked, she patted herself on her back on her acumen in judging the value of the stranger.

Seating herself along with her daughter beside him, the old woman put the young prince at his ease and asked: 'How is it, my son, that you spill these gems as you laugh? You do so often?"

"No. This is the first time I did. Recently I happened to eat a little kernel of a divine mango. On account of its great power, I am able to do so."

"Who gave that fruit to you? Not that I am interested in it."

"A sage gave it to me in the forest. Even that sage cannot do it for a hundred years to come."

"How so?"

"This mango-fruit grows only once in a hundred years."

"I see! I am so glad you got that precious fruit. You are indeed lucky."

She left the conversation at that but instructed her daughter privately to use all her arts to make the youngster laugh as often as possible. In his new-found love, the young man never suspected her intentions. The danseuse was amassing great wealth by collecting all the gems.

Human nature is apt to overreach itself in its eagerness. In her greed to possess the potentialities of the divine mango entirely the old woman decided on secreting the kernel of the divine mango which, according to her, was still in his close possession if not in his abdomen since he continued to confer the benefits. She struck on a plan.

So she told him one day: "My son, I think it is good once in a while to take a purgative as it will help maintain your health in good trim."

Little suspecting, the young prince drank the potion she gave. That medicine was a strong purgative and under its effects weaker men were known to have died. Naturally our young man too became very weak as a result of excessive purging. When he lost consciousness, the mother and daughter searched him. Not succeeding, they had him thrown out of their house into the street.

By God's grace, the young man's purge stopped. When he woke up, he was so weak that he was unable to move. A kindly soul gave him thin gruel. This revived his strength. He soon walked to the river-side and had a wash there. As he sat there, he brought back to his mind all that happened to him in the house of the danseuse and how he had been defrauded. However, he did not take it seriously.

Just as he was musing thus, he saw a few yards before him a sage surrounded by four disciples. The former was apparently in the last stage of his life. He was telling his four disciples: "After I am dead, you four divide among yourselves my turban, *kurta,* the cane and my sandals—one each. My turban will create at will large buildings. My *kurta* will give any amount of food at will. The cane will overcome enemies and my sandals will take you anywhere here or in other worlds. May God bless you!" As he said these words, his life departed.

Those four disciples who lived like brothers till then found to their horror that their preceptor's gifts proved to be a veritable apple of discord. They quarrelled among themselves as to who was to inherit which of the four gifts. Ultimately they agreed to refer the dispute to Kalimata after the cremation of their *guru* was over. So, hiding those four precious gifts in the womb of a tree, the four *chelas* carried the dead body of their *guru* to the cremation ground.

The young prince who was watching this strange drama decided that it was God's will that the four gifts of the departed sage were really meant for him. Otherwise why should this drama at all be enacted before his eyes when, of all times, he needed divine help? And why should they quarrel in the way they did and finally why should they leave the precious gifts right before his nose and go away, although for the nonce?

The young prince walked to the tree where the precious gifts were hidden, rescued them from the cavity and cleverly hid them at another place for the time being and slept at some other corner.

The foolish disciples returned after cremating their *guru* and when they found to their consternation their *guru's* gifts missing, they looked at one another suspiciously, although they knew for certain no one of them had stayed behind. Ultimately one of them advanced the theory that the gifts must have returned to the *guru* as they had quarrelled. Although not quite satisfied with the explanation, they departed from the place in disgust in opposite directions.

As soon as his coast was clear, the young prince came to where he had hidden the four gifts of the sage, took them out and contemplating on the sage, said: "O great soul! Pardon me if I have misappropriated your gifts bequeathed to your disciples. You know very well they quarrelled and I think it was your intention to punish them and I came in conveniently. At all events, I am your disciple now. Please bless me!"

Saying this, the youngster wore the turban on his head, put on the *kurta*, stepped into the sandals and holding the cane in his hand walked to the cool shade of a tree. Seating himself comfortably on the green grass he willed the *kurta:* "May I have good food!" No sooner said than came before him a tray of most inviting food and drink. He satisfied his hunger and thirst. Belching contentedly, he directed his will at the sandals and said: "I must now go to the danseuse's house," when lo! he was floating in the air and soon descended in the courtyard of her house.

30. DANSEUSE BECOMES A BABOON

WHEN the younger Prince descended into the courtyard of the danseuse's house, the first to see him do so was the maid-servant of the house. As soon as she saw him, she ran to her old mistress and whispered in her ear that the prodigal had returned.

The old woman was surprised to hear it because she was almost sure that the Prince would have reached Yama's abode by that time. Soon, however, she neared him and, finding him peering at her, smiled at him and said: "Welcome, my son, welcome! You see, when you took that purgative the other day, your condition became so bad that I really became afraid. You know we are alone here and there is no male help. Thinking that we were helpless to you, we placed you outside the house all the while praying that some better soul would come to your help. How happy am I now to find that God had answered my prayer! I hope you will not entertain any illwill against us but continue to live with us as before."

The Prince replied: "Don't worry, aunt! I have never at any time thought ill of you and I shall not do so and I am happy to accept your invitation to live here as of old."

The Prince started living in the company of the old woman's daughter as of old.

One night, however, when all had slept, he willed, with the help of his magic implements, that a large mansion rise at the back-yard of the danseuse's house. And so did one rise instantaneously! Next, he willed that the mansion be furnished charmingly. The same was accomplished in no time. Thither then the Prince repaired and slept far into the day.

Early in the morning, as soon as the young danseuse saw the new building behind her house, she was surprised. Out of curiosity she went inside it and was charmed by its beauty and opulence. When she went further inside, she saw her paramour, the Prince, sleeping soundly on a cosy bed! Surprised at the sight, she ran back home and reported to her mother all what she saw. The old woman too went inside the new building and saw for herself that her daughter had said the barest truth. Then she concluded that the Prince was no mean person and that he had more powers than she had ever thought of. She therefore wanted all the more to take full advantage of his stay in her home.

As soon as she saw the Prince come, she asked him: "How is it, son, that you have suddenly constructed a mansion down there?"

The Prince replied indulgently: "Oh, that is nothing. You know I have these things: this turban, *kurta,* cane and sandals? These were vouchsafed to me by my *guru.* With their help I can accomplish many things of which the construction of this house is a fleabite."

The Prince then related to the old lady the circumstances (with appropriate modifications) in which he came into possession of those four precious gifts and explained in detail the properties of each and how one should operate them.

The moment she heard these things, the old lady decided that those four gifts were really meant for her and her daughter. She wanted to device a plan by which the Prince could be disposed of quickly to the other world.

Following the plan, she came on the next day to the Prince and said: "My dear son! What shall I say? My daughter has suddenly taken ill. I consulted the astrologers. They say that she should propitiate a deity which is near the sea. I do not know how I can get there alone and perform the *pooja*."

"Aunt! Why do you worry? When I am here, you have little to fear. Look! Are you ready?"

The old woman said she would be ready in a few minutes. Soon she came carrying a basket full of flowers, fruits and the rest of the things that were meant for worship.

As soon as she came out, the Prince put on his sandals and holding her by the hand, willed "Let us go to the sea-shore". Within the twinkling of an eye the old woman and the Prince found themselves standing on the coast of the sea.

The danseuse pointed out the temple whereto the two walked. After bathing in the temple-tank, the old woman wanted to prepare *neyvedya* for the deity. But there was no firewood.

Said she to the Prince: "My son, what a fool have I been? I have forgotten to bring firewood. Would you help me by breaking some twigs from withered trees yonder?"

The Prince nodded and left in search of firewood.

When he did so, he inadvertently left all his four magic weapons in a bundle for which the old woman had been waiting.

As soon therefore as she saw his figure disappearing, she opened the bundle, took out the sandals, jumped on them and took hold of the other three implements and willed to return to her home. Even so, she walked into her home jubilant that she had outwitted the Prince at last.

She completely went under the belief that the Prince would never be able to get those things back from her. If only all our thoughts could be translated straight into actions!

When the Prince returned to the temple with the firewood, he was surprised not to find the old woman there. Neither was there any trace of the basket of flowers which she had carried with her. He made an extensive search of the place, fearing she had fallen into the sea. But there were no footprints. It was not before quite some time that he suddenly recollected his own package which he had left at a corner of the temple and which had contained the precious magic implements. When he went there, he was shocked to find it lying open and all its contents missing from it. It then dawned on him that the old woman had once again pulled a fast one on him. Chagrined at this thought, he finally consoled himself that even as they came to him, they had left him and as such, he had no right to complain.

Musing thus, he trudged on towards the city with his hands clasped behind his back.

On the way he had to cross a wooded part to reach the city.

Half way up there, he felt so hungry that he could not proceed any further before eating something.

He looked about and saw right before him a giant mango tree which had four sturdy branches. All those branches were bent with luscious ripe fruits. Thanking God for the timely help, he climbed up one of those branches and plucking the nearest fruit, ate it avidly. But the next moment he found himself transformed into a baboon! In the new form it was not difficult for him to hop on to the next branch which he did and from which also he plucked another fruit and ate. When he did so, again, he found himself transformed into an aged man! Descending along the branch, he caught hold of the third branch from which too he plucked another fruit and ate it since his hunger had not yet subsided. But this time he became the sturdy young man he was. Becoming curious, he ate the fruit of the fourth branch also, when lo! he found himself transformed into an eagle!

He now came to the conclusion that that tree was a miracle tree and that its four branches had those four different properties. In order to confirm his findings, he ate another fruit from the third branch, when, from an eagle he again became the young man that he was. Confirmed in his findings, the Prince now thought of a plan, how with this new find he could wreak vengeance on the deceitful danseuse and her daughter. Striking on a plan of action, he collected some fruits from those branches which could convert their eaters into baboons and eagles respectively.

Wrapping them into a bundle he walked vigorously towards the house of the danseuse. Reaching it, he comfortably seated himself on a stool outside the mansion. In the evening the danseuse and her daughter came out of the house as usual to watch the crowd. But to their surprise they saw the young Prince outside sitting with a bundle by his side.

Although the old woman had been sure that she was the winner in the war of wits against the Prince, she was now puzzled why he should return and sit in her verandah? This troubled her as she suspected that the Prince had some more tricks in his bag.

As though she saw him for the first time, she went near the Prince and said: "Oh my son! What shall I say? When you went in search of firewood a big tiger appeared from nowhere and started chasing me. I shouted for you and was afraid it might harm you. So I ran and ran and ran in search of you and failing in it, managed to come home. All the while I was worried about you. I cursed myself that I was not born a man. I am so happy to see you safe. Please come in. What is it that you carry in that bundle? More tricks?"

The Prince on hearing her words, laughed disarmingly and said: "Aunt! What tricks can I play before you? On my way I saw some good fruits on a mango tree. Knowing your taste I plucked some of them thinking you would be delighted to eat them."

"Oh, is that so? Let me see, let me see."

Then the Prince untied the bundle and showed her the fruits which were inviting.

Without even waiting to be given, she pinched one from his bundle and ate it. Simultaneously the Prince took out another fruit from the other bundle and gave it to the old woman's daughter. When both of them ate the mangoes, one became a baboon and the other an eagle!

31. THE REUNION

EVERY action has a reaction. This law holds good in the moral sphere also. The Indian law of Karma revolves round it and there is no escape from its conclusions if one does not wish to end up in a lunatic asylum betimes.

If the young prince had been systematically cheated by the danseuse and her daughter, the law had naturally been paving the way for their own destruction and if they ate the divine mango fruits of their own volition it was Nemesis working in its infallible way.

Taking hold of the baboon and the eagle, the young prince retrieved his magic implements, put on his magic *kurta* and turban, took hold of his magic wand and water-pot and gave away the rest of his belongings to learned and indigent people. He went on from place to place, like a beggar, along with the baboon and the eagle which helped him to earn his livelihood. In this manner he reached the city where his elder brother ruled.

Seeing the prosperity of that city, he asked a vegetable seller who passed by, who the king of that city was. That woman replied: "My son, sometime back the old King died without leaving any heir. According to his instructions the State elephant garlanded somebody from the forest and brought him to the city as the King. I do not know what his name is." The young prince had little difficulty in realising that it was his own brother who ruled over that kingdom and whom he thought, the elephant had killed the other day. However, he wanted to make sure that it was the case. He thought of a plan and according to which he went to the public square of the city and started displaying the antics of his monkey and the eagle. Standing before a particular shop, he demanded that he should be given a full sovereign as reward for the entertainment he had given. Such a demand made the shopkeeper wild. All persuasions having failed, the owner of the shop informed the police. When the police came and tried to reason with him, the prince became stubborn and refused to move away stating that he would not budge an inch if the King came. His impertinence was promptly reported to the King, who, on hearing of the strange behaviour of the beggar, smiled and wanted to have a look at the man before meting out punishment. He, therefore, came out into the streets and even from a distance he could see that the beggar was none other than his own lost brother. Not wishing, however, to openly recognise him, he asked his officials to command the shopkeeper to pay the entertainer what he wanted.

On returning to the palace, the King called his confidential minister and related to him his story from the beginning. He ended, "You will thus see that this monkey man is no other than my brother. I would naturally like to take him back into my household. Kindly advise me what I should do under the circumstances." In the meantime, the younger brother, taking the sovereign he was given, returned to the choultry by the side of which he made a temporary hut, where he stayed. With the aid of his magic implements he ordered delicious food and after giving a part of it to the monkey and the eagle, he ate the rest. When he was half way through it, the ministers of the King, who had been combing for him throughout the city, came to that place and extended the King's invitation for returning to the palace. The young prince was delighted that his brother had not forgotten him in his present exalted position. Accompanying the officials, he came to the palace and on seeing his elder brother, fell at his feet and made kind enquiries about him. The two brothers who had been long separated shed tears of joy on being united.

After having washed and rested for a while, the younger brother related all that had happened to him since their separation. He showed him the magic implements which had been his main succour. After staying thus for a few days, the two brothers wanted to see their parents. Accordingly, the elder brother handed over the kingdom to his minister temporarily, and in the company of his younger brother flew to where his parents were with the aid of the magic sandals his younger brother had. When they entered the house of their parents, the latter were sitting by the fireside. A handful of grains was boiling in a pot on the fire. Tears were streaming from their eyes as they visibly wept on the loss of their two brilliant sons. At that moment both the sons presented themselves before them and fell at their feet. The parents were extremely delighted that after all God had not deserted them. They embraced their children making them sit at a small fireside pit. Now the brothers related the part each had played or rather the part that destiny had played and their present whereabouts. The old king was extremely delighted when he was reunited with his darling children.

At the invitation of the elder son, the old kind accepted the kingship of the kingdom. At the suggestion of his aged father, the two sons married duly in royal households.

When they were thus spending the time merrily, one day the younger prince brought before the Raja Sabha the baboon and the eagle, and said: "Venerable friends! I have a great story to tell. Here, this eagle is an old danseuse. This baboon is her daughter. Both of them did me incalculable harm in the guise of supporting me." He explained in detail the circumstances under which they almost killed him by giving him a strange purgative and how they conspired to rob him of the magic turban and other implements and how ultimately he made them take these two shapes by means of the divine mango. In substantiating these charges he administered the other mango to both of them, by which the two women took their former shape.

When the assembled people saw this transformation, they were surprised beyond description. The King meted them due punishment, and drove them out of the city in dishonour.

The old King finding that his advanced age would not permit him to devote much time to the affairs of the State, handed over charge to his eldest son. With the help of his two children he marched against his old city which had been wrongfully taken from him by conspirators. On hearing that the old King and the princes were marching towards the city, the usurpers took to their heels. The old King handed over his kingdom to his younger son.

In course of time, the second son made such a name and fame for himself that the entire world praised him for his ingenuity and other qualities.

As Chaturya completed the story, the rays of the morning sun were shone through the chinks of the door. Perceiving the bright rays, he said to the princess who was seated by his side: "My dear, don't you think that you deserve a husband as clever and valorous as the young prince of whom you had been hearing? Now it is day. Go back to your work. We shall meet later."

32. IN QUEST OF PARIJATA

It was the turn of the elder Princess to meet Chaturya on the seventh night. When she came as usual dressed for the occasion and longed for his company, he told her the following story:

In the city of Amaravati lived King Amaresa who ruled his country justly and famously. However, he had no issues for a long time. His Minister too had no issues for long. In the course of a conversation however they had agreed that in the event of their getting a son and a daughter respectively, they would get them married.

After due propitiation of gods and other *dharmic* deeds, the King and the Minister were blessed with children. But while the Minister got a beautiful daughter, the King got a tortoise for his son. However much dispirited the King was at the calamity, he could not get out of his mind that after all he was his son. He therefore bestowed all the care and affection he was capable of on the tortoise. The Minister, however, was feeling extremely happy. He got two more daughters.

As soon as the Minister's eldest daughter came of age, he thought in terms of marriage for that girl, but it never occurred to him that he had given his word to marry her to the King's son. How could he, when the son was a tortoise? Yet the King could not help reminding his Minister of his promise when the latter laughed uproariously and said: "Your Majesty! You don't expect me to give my daughter to a tortoise?"

The King returned home crestfallen, and as he related the conversation to his wife, the tortoise was overhearing it and quite unexpectedly spoke: "Father! Do not feel disheartened; go once again and ask the girl!"

The King reluctantly sent word to the Minister's daughter pointing out her father's reply. That girl, however, on hearing it, went to her father, and said: "Father! I understand that you have given word to the King that you would give me in marriage to the King's son if he had one. Now that he has had a tortoise for a son, I may give out my mind. I have no objection to marry the tortoise if he can bring me the Parijata flower. In fact I shall marry any one who brings that flower!"

The Minister had no objection to that proposal, for he was sure that the tortoise could never be a candidate to that competition.

When the tortoise-Prince heard the challenge, he decided to accept it, and so said, "Father, please drop me into the ocean. I shall go and fetch the Parijata flower."

The King readily appreciated the idea and accordingly let the tortoise into the ocean. The tortoise swam all the seven seas and reached the Mount of Udayagiri and spread itself out on the path of the Sun.

When the Sun rose, Aruna saw the tortoise and informed his master of the presence of the tortoise on the way. Asking him to halt the chariot, the Sun descended and asked the tortoise "Why do you lie down on my path?"

The tortoise replied: "Lord! I am born as a son to a king. It ill befits him and myself. Why should we be put to this shame?"

SUN:"You were a prince in your last birth. When a sage was practising penance, you placed a tortoise on his hand out of fun. The sage cursed you to be born as a tortoise. Now that you have propitiated me, I am pleased to liberate you from this curse. Henceforward you shall have human form and your glory and brilliance shall exceed mine."

No sooner was this said than the tortoise metamorphosed into a human as lovely as the Love-god. He prostrated before him. At the request of the Prince, the Sun further endowed him with the power of putting on the form of a tortoise at will. The Sun further said: "A few *yojanas* from here is a forest where a sage sits in penance. If you please him he will give you the Parijata flower." Saying this, the Sun went on his diurnal motion.

The Prince hid the tortoise-shell that had covered him somewhere in the forest and searched for the sage whom he located soon. The sage was immersed in concentration. He waited for him to open his eyes. As soon as he did so, he fell at his feet and prayed for a Parijata flower. The sage too learnt all about the Prince and his quest, and so directed him to another sage ahead in the forest. This sage directed him to a third sage who, after hearing all about his quest, said: "If you go half a *yojana* in this direction, you will notice a temple dedicated to Lord Ganesa. Near it is a divine tank. Divine damsels come there for sport. Wait there unseen. When they dip themselves in water, steal the cloth of one of them and without looking back, walk into the temple and bolt the door. Not before extracting a promise from the damsel who will be after you, to give you the Parijata flower should you return the vest."

The Prince accordingly lay in wait for the divine damsels to appear. When they did so, they laid aside their clothes and entered the pellucid waters for sport. Noiselessly the Prince stole the vest of the leader of the party and walked briskly toward the Vinayaka Temple. But the girl who had noticed him ran after him and uttered the most enticing words to make him look back so that she could curse him to become a stone. But the Prince was too clever for her and so he quietly locked himself inside the temple without looking back at his attractive pursuer.

Finally after extracting a promise from her that she would fetch him the Parijata flower, he returned the vest through a chink in the door. But when he did so, the girl was so fascinated by the Prince's look that she decided to have him all for herself.

33. THE PRINCE'S ROMANCE

LOVE is such a sacred emotion that even Gods are not immune to its power. Its rules are the same here as in heaven.

When the divine damsel fell in love with the tortoise-Prince, she had surrendered herself to the Prince body and soul. Her mind was no longer her own. When the Prince wanted only one Parijata flower, the damsel decided to shower many at his feet, irrespective of how many he wanted or how he would dispose of them.

Well has it been said that the feminine mind is unfathomable. Its ways are so ingenious and implacable that the great minds of the world had been mute spectators at its sweep and range. The damsel had little difficulty in planning out her next step. Said she returning to her other friends who were still sporting in the waters: "I have cursed the man who stole my clothes into stone and have hurried back to you. Now it is time. All of you get going!"

On hearing the command of their leader, all the girls came out of the water, towelled their bodies and wrapped themselves in their clothes. They did their hair up so daintily for drying up that even the holiest of saints would lose his breath for a second at the sight.

Reaching heaven, the love-lorn damsel sent for Maya, the divine designer, and ordered him to make a guitar for her. In the meantime she went into Nandana, the heavenly garden, and picked a whole basketful of Parijata flowers. After paying Maya for the guitar, she prepared a plateful of delicious dishes for her lover and together with the guitar and Parijata flowers flew to the temple on the earth where the tortoise-Prince was waiting for her.

Seeing her floating down the heavenly path bewitchingly, the Prince ran towards her and locked her fervidly in an embrace which set the seal on their mutual love. Long did they lie on their back on the green lawns outside the temple, chatting, laughing and partaking of the divine food, while the autumnal moon shone above their heads in her full glory. The feathered fraternity with their sweet and muffled chirpings provided music for the eternal song the two lovers were composing.

Said the Prince: "My love! All that I asked of you was a single Parijata flower and you have brought me a basketful. Why?"

Damsel: "By bringing you a basketful of those flowers, I wanted to indicate in a small way the measure of my love towards you!"

Prince: "Well said! Now what for have you brought this guitar? Unfortunately I am not a musician at all!"

Damsel: "I was just coming to it. One need not be a musician in the technical sense to play on it. Don't you know that it is of divine origin? It will play the music of your heart! All that you have to do is to touch its strings when you feel strongly for my company and I shall be there, no matter what time or place, to be at your service."

Prince: "That is very thoughtful of you; in fact I was despairing how to get in touch with you when you go away from here at the call of your duty."

After indulging in all the meaningless talk which all lovers love to do, the divine damsel took leave of him, leaving the guitar to which the Prince clung as his own life's breath.

As he started on his return journey with the basket of Parijata flowers flung over his back, he accosted the last sage who had directed him to the Parijata flower. As a matter of courtesy, he told the sage about the success of his mission. Noticing the guitar, the sage asked: "What is that instrument, my child, and why do you carry it?"

The Prince replied: "It is a gift from a divine friend. Would you like to see its effect?"

"If you have no objection!"

"Of course no. Look!" said the Prince and twanged the guitar, when lo! came floating like a flake of snow the divine damsel holding the platter of delicious food. The bond of love between the two was so great that the sage's presence made no difference to them as they clung to each other in fast embrace while the sage turned aside for all appearances.

Not for nothing have the ancients stigmatised lust as the most die-hard of instincts. It manages to keep alive beneath a heap of ashes accumulated by years of penance. The sage, despite years of *tapas,* was shaken to the core of his being by the sight of this raging beauty and could not help courting her mentally for himself. Once his heart was set on its trail, his mind quickly devised the means of achieving the desire.

When the Prince returned to the sage, the latter asked him: "Great Prince, of what use are musical instruments to people who are born to protect others! Men like me on the other hand can put them to better use by singing the Lord's name. On the other hand, look at this wand of mine. It is magically potent. Once you direct it with a formula nothing human or super-human can stand before its might. It will annihilate single-handed whole armies. Just as the guitar in your hand, I have pretty little use for it. How about exchanging it for your guitar?"

The Prince being essentially a *kshatriya* readily agreed to the suggestion and got the magic wand with its formula in return for his guitar and after offering *pranams* to the venerable sage continued his journey.

As he had proceeded but a few yards the magic stick which was duly bequeathed to him suddenly jumped out of his hold and falling at the Prince's feet said in a human voice: "Master! I have been on starvation diet since the sage acquired me. Now that he has coveted your guitar for any purpose other than what he told you, why don't you permit me to pound him to death and satisfy my hunger?"

"Just as you please!" replied the Prince and it was done so sooner than said. The Prince thereupon took hold of the guitar as well as the magic wand and proceeded further on his journey.

That sage was not the only one who fell from the chosen path at the sight of temptation, for both the other two sages whom he met and to whom he expressed his gratefulness for their guidance met the same fate and the Prince became the gainer of a coat which could give at will all that one desired by way of food or clothes etc., and a pair of sandals which could take one to any place in this world or any other.

As soon as he reached the sea-shore he again sent an s.o.s. to the divine damsel in the usual manner. When she alighted, they had their fun, and at the time of their departure, the Prince addressed the damsel: "My love! I am the Crown-Prince of Amaravati," and related his story and the cause of his quest in detail and concluded: "You will now realise that I shall, on reaching my city, present this Parijata flower to the Minister who in duty bound will marry his first daughter to me. Till that time I shall deposit this guitar and my three magic implements at the foot of this tree. You should wait here guarding them till I come back to take them."

The damsel nodded and the Prince thereupon took out the tortoise shell from his pocket and adjusting it over him, shrunk his body into it, becoming a tortoise; carrying in his teeth the basket of Parijata flowers hung by a rope he dived into the sea.

Reaching the city, the tortoise-Prince stood before his father with the Parijata flowers. The King who was astonished by the feat of his son, promptly sent word to his minister who on seeing the Parijata flower, had no option but to abide by his word by agreeing to give his daughter in marriage to the tortoise. The minister's daughter, however, who heard of the success of the Prince, felt innately glad that her would-be husband was no ordinary tortoise which could never perform such a feat. She felt confident that he was superhuman and decided to wait patiently for the disclosure.

The minister performed the marriage of all the three daughters, the others being given to two other princes. All the three were treated equally.

34. THE PRINCE UNCOVERED

On the night of the marriage, all the three brides were ushered into their respective nuptial chambers. While the younger daughters sought the consummation of their lives in the arms of their husbands, the eldest one stifled her emotion in her own bosom at the sight of her tortoise-husband poised on the cot and went to sleep on her own.

It was past midnight and the eldest bride was fast asleep when the tortoise-Prince stealthily made his exit from the nuptial room through a window and hurried to the tree under which he had hidden his guitar and other magic implements which he found intact.

Taking hold of the guitar, he twanged the strings when the divine damsel floated down in her wonted manner, bringing the delicacies with which she fed her lover.

After remaining in her company for quite some time, the Prince put on his tortoise shell and returned to the nuptial chamber before daybreak, unobserved.

Day after day things went on in the same manner.

One day the younger bridegrooms went out on a hunt with the necessary paraphernalia. News about it reached the tortoise-Prince too who, calling his wife, asked her to make arrangements for his going out on the hunt.

Replied she, "Lord! Pardon me if I say these words. Hunting is a dangerous thing even for human beings. I shall be more than happy if my lord continues to be alive and in my care."

Tortoise-Prince: "I quite appreciate your sentiment, but I do not want to be singled out as useless. Please tell your father to make arrangement for my hunt."

With great misgiving the girl went to her father and communicated her husband's wish. The Minister laughed on hearing it, but out of pity for his daughter, he sent a lame horse, a blunt sword and a dummy retinue for the use of his first son-in-law.

On receiving them, the tortoise-Prince asked his wife to tie him up securely on the saddle which she did. The party went abreast of the other two for a time.

When, however, a turn came, the tortoise-Prince diverted his horse by a lane and reached the seashore. By a *mantra* he crossed the sea along with the lame horse, and reached the foot of the tree where his magic implements lay hidden. Assuming his sun-like form, he took out his magic sandals. Riding upon them he flew to where his two brothers-in-law had encamped, seeing whom the two Princes fell on all fours and prostrated before the august presence, thinking he was an angel.

"Brothers!" said the tortoise-Prince, "I have come to bless you. If at any time you have any difficulties, think of me. I shall help you overcome them like mist before the sun."

"We are greatly beholden to you, Sir" said they and fell at his feet.

"Well, I want something in return from you, right now, if you would have my help later!"

"What may that be?" asked they in chorus.

"Give me your rings of insignia. Be sure I shall return them to you some day."

The two Princes gladly parted with their rings when the tortoise-Prince went back to the foot of the tree, wherefrom he returned to the palace, in tortoise form, carrying some birds and animals of prey which he said he had shot.

One fine morning news got around that an enemy king was marching against that kingdom. The King called his Minister and said: "Look, I have become old and I have only a tortoise as son, so he is not of help to me. You make arrangements for the defence and deploy the necessary forces!"

The Minister came home and broke the news to his family whereupon his two younger sons-in-law jumped and offered to lead the King's forces against the enemy. The Minister accordingly placed two powerful contingents at their disposal when the youngsters whipped their prancing steeds.

The tortoise-Prince who heard of the whole affair told his wife to ask her father to send him at the head of another force against the enemy.

When she heard it, she was greatly agonised, but as a dutiful wife, approached her father with the request.

Much against his will, the Minister agreed to send the tortoise-Prince too at the head of another force. As before the tortoise-Prince had himself tied tightly to the saddle of a warhorse.

The two brothers-in-law went laughing at their backs at the sight.

On the way the tortoise-Prince turned his horse along an aisle and reaching the seashore, crossed the sea along with the horse as before and reached the foot of the tree where he had hidden his magic implements. Casting off his tortoise shell, assuming his divine form and taking hold of his magic wand, he re-entered the battlefield in full panoply. His dazzle blinded the field for a time. When finally the two brothers-in-law saw him, they recognised him as the angel who had promised them his help.

The two of them got down from their horses and prostrated before him and prayed for help in vanquishing the enemy.

Replied the tortoise-Prince, "Be of good cheer. Both of you keep well behind the lines and watch."

Saying this, he took out the magic wand and addressed it: "You have been starving all these days. Now, go and annihilate the enemy hordes and fill your belly!"

Roaring like Indra's *vajrayudha* the wand entered the enemy lines and broke the skulls of the soldiers like a nutcracker. The entire army fell like a pack of cards before its onslaught and those who remained fled for their lives while the two brothers-in-law watched with bated breath the havoc which the angel's wand was inflicting.

When the enemy lines thus became demoralised leaving a vast debris of dead and dying, the tortoise-Prince beamed towards his two brothers-in-law and waving his hand, galloped his steed to where he came from, namely the foot of the tree, where he replaced the magic wand, saying "You have had your fill today!"

Putting on his shell again and transforming himself into a tortoise, the Prince hurried back to the palace on his horse where the trumpets were deafening the ears with their victory music.

The Minister welcomed his two younger sons-in-law and complimented them on their valour in their total victory against the enemy, while he completely ignored his first son-in-law who was jogging along on the fatigued steed.

Going straight into his apartment, the tortoise-Prince asked his wife to run the bath with hot-water. When she did so, he entered the bathroom stating that no one should enter it while he had his bath.

The Prince's wife who nodded, was caught by curiosity. 'Why in heaven's name should a tortoise have hot-water bath?'

When a woman becomes curious, there is nothing on earth that can prevent her from pursuing it.

She therefore peered through the keyhole. The tortoise-Prince had shed his shell and was shining in his angelic lustre. The sight literally blinded her vision and she fell down unconscious for a time.

Waking up, she made up her mind to have him as he was then, at all costs.

She wriggled through a slit in a side door and managed to steal the tortoise shell which the Prince had cast aside, and before he could discover, threw it into a burning fire which reduced it to ashes in a second. With bated breath she waited outside for her glorious husband to come out.

The Prince in vain searched the entire bathroom for the missing shell to slide into before emerging.

In the end he came out as he was and who should it be but his wife, who clung to his neck sobbing!

35. THE TORTOISE-PRINCE UNRAVELS

It was conventional for ancient poets to describe women as thoughtless, which only shows that poets were themselves thoughtless in the distribution of epithets. Or was it that they were being merely chivalrous?

The Tortoise-Prince too, in conformity with the then practice, mildly chided his wife when he learnt that it was she who whisked away his shell and destroyed it. Said he: "Fool that you are! I should have liked to remain in that shell for some more time. How true that women have no patience?"

"My lord!" replied she in a voice that was reverberating with her untold joy, "you dont know the agony I was going through all these days, what with my sisters having all the fun of married life while I, the eldest, had to go without anything, not even a human husband to boast of. O, lord! How possibly could you be so unkind as to shield this godly form from even my eyes. Your heart must be made of flint!" and smothered him with kisses as she gave expression to her pent up feelings in undisguised words.

As he had just had his bath, the Tortoise-Prince went into his room, offered worship to the Almighty and ate the food so lovingly served by his wife. As he sat on a sofa eating the fragrant *tambul* given by her, the latter took leave of him for a few seconds and rushed into the palace, to inform her parents of her discovery about her husband. The aged Minister in turn ran to inform the King who, followed by his Queen hurried to the Minister's place where the Tortoise-Prince was seated. When the party entered the chamber, it was impossible to tell who was the happiest among them.

As the King and Queen stood petrified on seeing their celestial looking son, the latter came forward and prostrated before them when the King raised him and hugged him while the Queen stood by watching with flowing tears and smoothened his rebellious hair.

"My child!" said the King in a choking voice, "How happy I am to see you in this form! I cannot tell you how agonising have all these years been to me! There were times when I wished I had no son at all, instead of a tortoise which, but for the fact it was begotten by me, would have been an object of contempt to all. Your mother was one with me in my sorrows. Again I had despised God for having cheated me by what I thought was a worthless gift. But I must tell you one thing; I have never ceased to admire your wife who kept her word or rather her father's word, for, he could well have refused to abide by the pledge and justifiably too. Well, I must say, it is all due to her luck—shall I say, pluck—that you have turned out to be what you are. All glory to her! But pray tell me all about yourself—how you got this divine form etc. Let us get seated —all of us."

By this time news got around that the Tortoise-Prince had become a glorious human Prince and all the members of the royal and ministerial households had gathered round the room to have a glimpse at the Prince.

Among them were, of course, the Princes-in-law. When they saw the Prince, they had the shock of their lives for it was no other than the "angel" who had saved them by winning the battle against the invading enemy! There could be no doubt of it, for, there were the two rings of insignia he had taken from them dangling from his belt! They didn't know exactly what to do but decided to wait and hear what the Prince had to relate.

At this stage the Queen intervened and addressing her husband, said: "Lord! Our child should be feeling tired now. Won't you let him rest to-night and relate his story tomorrow morning? Perhaps we can invite all the citizens to listen to him and we can celebrate the event in a fitting manner."

At this the Minister's daughter looked at the Queen gratefully seeing which the aged King smiled and said: "Yes! That is an excellent idea. Let my children take rest. All of you meet tomorrow morning at the durbar. Minister! Have the occasion fittingly celebrated, will you?"

Not being able to answer one way or the other, the Prince remained quiet. After the crowd had melted away, the Minister's daughter hustled her husband into the nuptial chamber when her two sisters nudged her at the ribs.

Once they were alone, both felt they had not missed much and during the course of their talk the Prince said: "My love! I have forgotten to tell you about one thing in my life. I have also another wife. Do not feel alarmed. That makes little difference to you. In fact she has vowed to see me married to you with her own hands. Speaking of her, she does not belong to this world. Ah! There you are. That makes it easy for you, doesn't it? Well, she really belongs to Indra Loka. She was the one who helped me, or rather brought me those *parijata* flowers by means of which I was able to marry you. You see?"

"I knew from the beginning, my lord!" said the Prince's wife, "that you were no ordinary tortoise. From the day you wrought that miracle, I was positive that you were superhuman and I patiently waited, without the least demur."

"And now you have your reward!" replied the Prince pinching her cheek.

"Listen!" he continued. "Tomorrow, after the recital of my whole story, I shall call my celestial wife here who too will put her *imprimatur* on our reunion.

On the following morning, the capital was gaily decorated and the temple gongs proclaimed special *pujas* for the welfare of the heir-apparent. To the King and Queen, it was literally a second child-birth.

The durbar was full; while all the menfolk occupied one side, the womenfolk and the children occupied the other. The women of the royal household sat behind a silken curtain that decorated the rostrum. Some nearby Chiefs of State who had heard of the miracle, had hastened to attend the function.

After duly bowing before the august assembly, the Prince said: "How or why I was born as a tortoise I do not really know, nor can I explain. To me personally, excepting what others said, it made no difference, for I had all my faculties in full possession. Well, when I heard the contract between my beloved father and the Minister, and when it came to the breaking point, I thought I should throw in my weight in the cause of the friendship between my father and the Minister. Well, I offered to and did fulfil the near impossible condition with the help of God."

The Prince narrated how he met the three ascetics on the way and how, acting on their advice, he contacted the angelic woman with whose help he managed to get the *parijata* flower; how he married the celestial damsel; her guitar; how he came into possession of the magic *kurta, danda* and the sandals of the ascetics after killing them; how he helped his brothers-in-law in defeating the enemies. In token of his having done so, he produced the rings of insignia which the two brothers-in-law identified as theirs.

Putting the latter at their ease, he said: "I did only a duty in helping them; it was on account of my father who was to gain. The fact still remains that they helped in the war."

He ended, how, out of the thoughtless act of his wife, he had to lose the shell and come out prematurely.

The deafening cheers of the citizens rent the air. The Prince had already brought the magic implements and the guitar. So, he twanged the strings of the instrument whereupon the celestial damsel came gliding in the usual manner and embraced him.

The Prince thereafter called his wife, the Minister's daughter, who was seated behind the curtain. The nymph embraced her and placing the latter's hand on that of the Prince, said: "May you live happily".

Addressing the Prince, the celestial damsel said: "Now that you have your legally wedded wife, do not think of me too often, please for my sake" and left.

The Prince lived long and happily with the Minister's daughter.

When Chaturya had finished this story, it was nearing daybreak. So he asked the Princess: "Don't you think, you should marry a Prince of the calibre of the Tortoise-Prince? Now it is time you returned".

And she left with a heaving breast.

36. THE INTREPID GAMBLER

IT was the turn of the younger Princess on the eighth night to keep the company of Chaturya in the nuptial chamber. She therefore dressed herself appropriately for the occasion and entered the room.

After exchanging pleasant banters, the girl left Chaturya in no doubt of her eager intentions when Chaturya cleverly switched on to a wonderful story to which the Princess listened with rapt attention. Said he:

There lived in a village of the Chola country a not very well-to-do Brahmin. He could not boast of any properties nor for that matter did he follow any regular profession for earning his livelihood. Gradually he drifted into the notorious avocation of gambling. In course of time he developed such cunning tact in it that he always came out as the victor.

Having exhausted all big quarries he was forced to challenge even the meanest man on the road for a bout and rob him of what little money he had in his pocket on the gambling board. So much so, people were afraid of meeting him in the streets. As soon as the people saw his silhouette at the end of the street, they would duck for safety and bolt the doors. Yet he managed to earn a rupee or two each day from some forlorn man.

One day it came to pass that not even a stranger came his way. As he was returning home broken hearted, he saw the door of the local Vishnu temple open. It flashed across his mind that the temple-priest must surely be inside and him he decided to victimise that day.

South Indian temples are notoriously dark inside the sanctums and the priests who have cat-like eyes could easily spot others without being seen and prove often of great comfort to visitors. But the gambler was no welcome visitor and so the priest ran for cover behind the huge figure of the deity.

Puzzled at not finding the priest anywhere about, the gambler shouted: "O priest! Don't you see a pilgrim come for worship? What are you doing?"

The priest was too worldly to rise to the gambler's bait and so kept mum. Indeed he even subdued his breathing lest the other man should detect him.

Not having any reply, the gambler was nevertheless loath to return home empty-handed. As he started thinking of his next step, the image of Lord Vishnu standing before him offered itself to him as a possible quarry. There was little doubt about his own victory in a game, but how could he make the idol pay him in that event? Easy! With a clear conscience, he could walk out with any piece of jewellery belonging to the deity should the Lord become indebted to him!

So he spread the mat and threw the dice, first on his behalf and next on behalf of Lord Vishnu. Indeed the gambler became so flattered with the choice of Lord Vishnu as his partner that he lavished all his attentions and artistry both on his own and on the Lord's side. Jettisoning all his hat-tricks he came out, quite fairly, the victor.

Wrapping up the dice tenderly, he addressed the Lord: "Thank you Lord for obliging me today. I hope I have your permission to take the idol of your noble spouse Lakshmi with me in lieu of your payment. That will do for the present. See you later. Ta-ta!"

The priest who was an eye-witness to all what happened had his tongue parched out of fright. Although he saw the other man walking away with the idol, he did not have the courage to stop him for obvious reasons.

Lord Hari who was a silent witness to this drama could not help admiring the gambler for his temerity and so called out to him and said: "My boy! Why are you in such haste about the money? Leave the idol here and come for the money tomorrow when I shall pay you!"

The gambler looked back with a smile and said: "Ha ha! I knew Lord, you will call me back. It all depends on which button you press. Now listen; will you promise me you won't default, for, I don't want to take any chances?"

"Surely I shall pay you" replied Lord Vishnu and the gambler replaced the idol at the feet of the Lord and went home.

The divine dancers Rambha, Tilottama, Urvasi and the lot of them were in the habit of appearing before that deity of Lord Vishnu each midnight and dance before Him and offer their obeisance. That night when they had completed their worship and were about to start home, the Lord asked Rambha to stay back at his temple allowing the others to return. Rambha obeyed.

Early next morning the gambler appeared before the Lord of the temple right in time and demanded payment.

The Lord replied: "My child! You are expecting a paltry sum of money from me, but I am going to present a magnificent gift to you as a mark of my esteem for your conduct. Look! This is Rambha, the divine damsel. I am giving her in marriage to you. Go and live with her. Rambha! This is your husband; you should obey him to the letter, do you hear? Now, both of you come near and be united. Bless you!"

Greatly pleased with Rambha's beauty and divinity the Brahmin took her to his dwelling place and introduced her to his first wife.

Finding the habitation too small, Rambha by her powers conjured up a huge mansion and furnished it with all amenities. She next hugged the gambler's wife and said: "We are now sisters; let us make our husband as happy as we can!" She made the gambler's wife look as divine as herself with her touch and fitted her with all the jewels she could think of. No wonder the other woman took to Rambha as her own Mother Goddess and preferred to serve her like a dog while allowing her husband to have all the fun with the other. Thus they started life in right royal manner.

After the lapse of a week Rambha said to her husband: "Lord! Give me permission to go to Devaloka for a few hours, for it is my turn to dance before Devendra today. If I don't go, he will become angry which may prove calamitous to us!"

"What nonsense do you talk? Once you are married to me, no one else has any power over you. I won't permit you to go anywhere," replied the gambler angrily.

"Excuse me, Lord! The rules of Devaloka are different. I promise I shall not fail or default you. Pray allow me to go!"

"If you so insist, I too shall accompany you to Devaloka!"

As it is not possible for mortals to proceed to Devaloka in human bodies, Rambha caused him to become a flower-garland. Wearing it she proceeded to Devaloka. Reaching it, she reconverted him to his original form and leaving him at the foot of a tree on the outskirts of Devaloka, went inside and performed her wonted dance-recital before Indra.

As the gambler was witnessing the performance unseen by others, he saw that at a certain stage Rambha became so exhausted in her performance that she fell down, when all Devas including Devendra came running to her and with great deference gave her first aid.

At this the gambler's chest heaved with pride at the thought that he was the husband of that lady whom even the Devas treated with great respect!

After taking leave of the Devas, Rambha came to where she had left the gambler and turning him again into a flower-garland descended down along with it and touched the earth on the banks of the holy Kauveri where she reconverted him into human form.

They had to go further on to reach their distant home, but seeing some of the angels taking their bath in the sacred river, the gambler changed his mind and told Rambha: "Rambha, you had better go by yourself to our place. I want to stay behind for a short time and shall follow you later!"

Accordingly Rambha started on her onward journey while the gambler went near the Devas who were taking bath. He spotted some of them as the same people who had revered his wife in the Devaloka a short while ago. He strutted before them like a vain peacock but none of them took note of him. It stung him to the quick at the thought that those Devas did not consider him, the husband of one whom they revered, fit enough even for recognition, not to speak of reverence.

Infuriated by their neglect, the gambler reached out for a couple of wiry twigs from a nearby tamarind tree with which he started flogging them, shouting at them "You don't consider me, Rambha's husband, good enough for your reverence, you waifs! Eh, you are drunk with power, aren't you? To hell with you all."

Bewildered by this unprovoked attack, the Devas were first inclined to think that he was a mad man, but his recognition of them and his reference to Rambha made them alter their opinion and hie themselves back to Devendra to report.

37. RAMBHA'S CURSE

FOOLS rush where angels fear to tread. This proverb had no better application than in our gambler who flogged the angels. Not content with what he had done, he walked home like a peacock to proclaim his achievements to Rambha.

It is easy to judge a person from the manner in which he starts a conversation. Like a fencer some beat about the bush before coming to the point which is only an index of their underestimation of the other man. But there are others who talk at point-blank range with disastrous results. But half-wits and nitwits have their own ways.

Our gambler for instance chose the long ambit. As soon as he saw Rambha, he started laughing uproariously.

"What is the matter, lord?" asked she.

"Oh, nothing!"

"Are you all right?"

"Fine, much better than you are!"

"Thank God!" replied she feeling relieved.

"Rambha! I had my day."

"What do you mean?" asked she.

"Well, you remember those fellows in the Devaloka who came to your help when you swooned?"

"Yes, what of them?" asked she, feeling apprehensive.

"I met them down there."

"You did?"

"I beat them up!"

"What? You did so and for what?" asked she becoming nervous.

"They failed to salute me, your husband, when I accosted them at the river-bank."

"Good god! You have really upset the apple-cart. I am sure they will complain to Devendra who would assuredly take me to task and you too. Maybe, curse us!"

The gambler now became jittery and clinging to her, begged: "Rambha, hurry up to Indra, please, and try to save me from his anger!"

Rambha accordingly left for Devaloka greatly agitated and stood before Indra bowing. On seeing her Indra who had already heard the complaint from the aggrieved party chastised her: "Not only did you think fit to live with a human, but made that chaff of a man beat my devas too! How dare you insult me thus? Take this curse!" roared he.

The aggrieved Devas, however, intervened and said: "Lord! Rambha is innocent. It is her husband who is wicked and is the culprit. Please be lenient on her!"

Indra relented and agreed to modify his curse which he pronounced as follows: "Rambha! You shall become an evil spirit and live in Bhooloka. Till such time as the present eleven tall towers of sacred Vishvanatha's temple at Kashi are pulled down and are reconstructed, you shall stay in that form!"

Submitting to the inevitable, Rambha requested Indra' to stay that curse till she saw her husband and communicated this news. Indra agreed.

Running home Rambha related, amidst tears, to her gambler husband Indra's curse and said, "Lord! I shall soon become an evil spirit, but let me chalk out a way for our early reunion. After becoming an evil spirit, I shall "possess" the daughter of Kashi Raja. You come there and offer to de-possess the princess. I shall co-operate with you and convince the King of your ability to do so. As a part of the treatment, prescribe to the King that all the eleven tall towers of the Vishvanatha temple be demolished and reconstructed. You will thus be aiding my early release and our reunion." Little do fools realise the consequences of their actions.

The king's favourite daughter was possessed by an evil spirit and as a result she behaved in such a way that she drew tears from all the people of the city. The royal parents wore their eyes out weeping. The princess tore her clothes, spat at people and jumped from balconies. The royal household became soaked in calamity.

The king widely made it known that whoever would de-possess his daughter of the evil-spirit could marry her.

A few who aspired to her hand without the requisite qualification, learnt their mistake at an enormous cost.

When the gambler went to Kashi, therefore, the atmosphere was tense.

Walking into a hotel run by an old woman, he asked her "Mother! What is the news in this city? I am new to it"

"O, my son!" began the lady. "The latest news is that the King's daughter is mad. They say she is possessed by a devil. The King has offered to give her hand to whomsoever would cure her of her malady. Many a young man has come to do so; but failed miserably and the King is overwhelmed with sorrow!"

"Mother! In my early days I had travelled all over the country—from Malabar to Himalayas—and have sat at the feet of many sages who have taught me all the *mantras.* I have cured worse cases. Poor King!" said he.

The old woman smiled and asked: "Are you sure of what you are saying?"

"As sure as I am alive," replied he.

"Look, my son! The King's order is to bring to him anyone who claims to have such knowledge, and failure to do so is punishable. Would you therefore accompany me to the King? If you have no objection, I shall call you my grandson. Now, come and have a wash and no one should go out on an empty stomach. Food will be ready in a few minutes." She went inside.

After providing a sumptuous food, the old woman took the gambler before the King. The latter who had of late seen a crop of pseudo *mantriks* was inclined to be sceptic. Asked he of his Minister *tete-a-tete;* "Doesn't he look a boor? Do you think he will have the stuff in him?"

"Who knows Lord, which snakepit contains the snake? Appearances are often deceptive. I believe there will be no harm in allowing him to try," replied the Minister.

The King asked the gambler: "You know that I have offered to give the hand of my daughter to whomsoever cures her of her madness. Now I add half my kingdom to it. But I would also postulate that, having offered to cure her, should you fail to do so, you must answer it with your head. Are you game?"

Normal people look before they leap but gamblers do so after leaping. Consistent with the character of his tribe our hero promptly put his signature on to the agreement incorporating the strange clauses and started operations with gusto.

Ordering for a complete outfit of a magician's paraphernalia, he lighted a massive oil lamp with a large wick, chanted imaginary spells and uttered incomprehensible words and invoked Rambha on the large flame in token whereof he called for a cackling spark which, to the astonishment of all assembled, it did give forth.

Convinced as the King became of the power of the gambler, he caused his daughter to be brought into the room. When she did, our hero took a handful of the sacred ash and uttering some formula threw it on her face. True to her promise, Rambha who "possessed" the princess, cooperated, and the latter tamed. The gambler then ordered her to follow him to a nearby hill. On the way he made her carry a huge piece of rock. The royal retinue which followed the strange pair felt panicky lest the rock should descend on their heads. But emboldened by the presence of the *mantrik,* they followed them at a distance.

On reaching the foot of the hill, he asked the princess to deposit the rock on the ground. She did so meekly.

When the gambler showed her a mirror, the princess blushed at her appearance and ran for shelter behind a tree.

It was clear that she had become normal.

Thereafter the royal retinue took charge of her and led her to the palace.

38. THE GAMBLER 'CURES' THE PRINCESS

ALTHOUGH it may be disparaging to many, it is nevertheless true that fortune often favours fools; but whether all the beneficiaries in this case succeed in taking full advantage of it when it comes, is quite another matter. Most, however, do; for we often see lucky people turning out to be clever *after* the event.

Left alone at the foot of the hills, the gambler called out to the invisible Rambha and asked her, "Now, Rambha, tell me what should I do next?"

The unseen Rambha replied: "All that you have to do is to make the king demolish the eleven towers of Vishvanatha's temple and have others rebuilt in their place as quickly as possible. Make it part of your treatment of the girl. In the meantime I shall proceed to our home and await you."

Next, the gambler went to where the Princess was hiding. He gave her new garments to wear and now that she had become normal, she had no difficulty in wearing them to perfection. Followed by her, he went to the palace where the royal parents received their daughter amidst tears of joy.

After the Princess had gone to her apartment, the King and his ministers took the gambler to the state-room and expressed their eternal debt of gratitude to him.

Acknowledging them, the latter replied: "Sire! Your daughter has no doubt been cured. But the devil which had possessed her demands a heavy price for a permanent cure!"

King: Sir! I am willing to pay any price and you know it.

Gambler: Well, it is this. The tall towers of Lord Vishvanatha's temple which number eleven should all be pulled down and others equally big should be constructed in their place. Your daughter's cure will be permanent from that date.

King: Is that all? I shall have it done this instant.

Even so, the King sent an army of messengers throughout his territory to comb out all artisans, sculptors and what not. In an incredibly short time he had all the eleven towers reconstructed to the great admiration of all. The gambler, on seeing it, pronounced that the cure of his daughter had become permanent.

The King fixed an auspicious day on which he gave away half his kingdom to the gambler and also his daughter in marriage to him. After staying a few days at Kashi, he started for his native home followed by his pretty wife, the Princess, and cartloads of rich presents. When he neared home, Rambha, hearing of his arrival, went personally to receive them with due honours, her curse having expired by then. He introduced the Princess to his two other wives and all the three lived happily.

A few days later Rambha asked her husband leave to go to Devaloka to pay her respects to Indra, adding: "Indra does not yet know that I am now released from his curse!" The gambler reluctantly assented and when she stood before Indra smiling, Indra was agreeably surprised.

"When did my curse lapse?" asked he.

"A couple of days back, my Lord!" she replied.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, my Lord. The towers have been reconstructed."

Indra meditated for a few seconds and saw through his supersense that it was so and he smiled. Taking leave of him, Rambha returned to her gambler-husband and lived happily with him and his co-wives.

39. FORGERY IN YAMA-LOKA

THE gambler, by his achievements, became so famous that Yama, the god of death, wanted to see him. So, he sent his messengers to fetch him to his abode. But when the messengers arrived at the gambler's house, they were unable to enter it on account of the power of chastity of his three wives. They waited at the door looking for an opportunity. The gambler got scent of it but remained supremely unconcerned for a whole day, after which he sent for them. When Yama's messengers went inside and communicated their master's desire, the gambler asked them: "You say you are the messengers of Yama. Is that not so? Well, which Yama do you mean, the old or the new one?"

The messengers were flabbergasted. "Honestly, we don't know", they replied.

"Go then and find it out first and come to me later on" he ordered.

When the messengers reported to Yama the gambler's question, Yama himself felt upset. He doubted if there had not been some changes in his portfolio recently, so he ran to Indra to ask him. Indra knitted his brow and replied: "I don't know myself. Let us ask Brahma".

Together they went to Brahma and asked him: "Lord, has there been a change of late in the personnel of Yama's post?"

"I dont know!" replied Brahma who, accompanied by Indra and Yama, went to Vishnu. Pleading ignorance, Vishnu on his part took them all to Shiva at Kailasa. Lord

Siva heard the purpose of their strange mission and smiling indulgently himself felt a strange desire to see the man who had put all the gods on tenterhooks. So he called Yama and said: "Look! You had better go yourself to Bhuloka and fetch the man here at my bidding!" Yama, arming himself to the teeth, strode away on his mountainous buffalo to Bhuloka.

In the meantime the gambler called his wives and said: "Listen, babies. I shall soon feign death. You had better embalm my body and consign it in a box till I call out for you. Do not burn it even if it takes a dozen years. Do you understand?" They agreed.

When Yama tapped at his door, the gambler promptly went to him. A hefty cow chanced to wait near the door. Yama jumped on its horns and rattled it and the cow rushed at the gambler and pierced the gambler's body with her horns. His body fell down with a thud while Yama tied up his life with his noose and dragging him presented him before the Trinity of Gods.

On seeing the gambler, Siva called out the divine accountant Chitragupta and asked: "Chitragupta! What does this man's ledger say?"

"Lord! He is the worst sinner!' replied Chitragupta.

On hearing this, the gambler jumped with lightning speed and slapped Chitragupta on the face. The latter became too stunned for words.

Gods: Hey, man! Why did you slap Chitragupta?

Gambler: O, Gods! Pray hear me. It is extremely difficult for any mortal to have *darshan* even of one among you, Three Gods. When that is so, I have had the good fortune of having the *darshan* of all three of you, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. Having had it, how possibly can any sin attach to me? And how dares he call me a sinner? His statement appeared to me an unforgivable disrespect to this august assembly and that made me irate and caused me to punish him, Lords. I have no other grudge against him! "

The Trinity of Gods became so pleased with the gambler's performance that they made him deputise Yama for an hour and a half in the latter's kingdom. Consequently the gambler proceeded to Yamapuri followed by Chitragupta, his ledgers, and other paraphernalia of his new office.

Reaching Yamapuri, the gambler asked Chitragupta: "Hey; accountant! Tell me what, according to your papers, will be the duration of my life in this world?"

Trembling from head to foot Chitragupta opened his page and read out: "Today is the last day of your life."

"What?" shouted the gambler. "You are a damn fool. Scratch that entry and rewrite: 'a hundred years from today'."

Chitragupta could not help doing so.

Next he called out Indra's elephant Iravata and ordered: "Henceforward you are subject to my jurisdiction. You must obey me. I am now putting you on a special job. Search out the old Yama and tear him to pieces with your tusks. Do you hear?"

Iravata, unable to refuse, strode in search of the old Yama and spotting him started attacking him with its *vajra*-like tusks. The poor old Yama ran yelling to Indra for shelter. Indra ran to Brahma and together all the three fled to Vishnu who took them all to Siva who allayed their fears and calmed the elephant. He heard their story. Wishing to have an on-the-spot enquiry, Siva started for Yama-loka.

The gambler sensing what was up, looked at the time and found hardly twenty minutes left of his Yama-ship. "I should make the best use of the time left, or I shall come to grief" thought he.

On the spur of the moment he conjured up a plan of action and snapping his fingers walked out to receive Siva's party.

As soon as he met them half-way up, he put on such an air of righteous indignation that Siva was a trifle embarrassed and had to take a defensive attitude and was constrained to ask him apologetically: "My boy! How is it that you have left the post of duty ere it is time?"

"It is no use, Lord" replied the gambler with a wry face. "I have not seen such indiscipline even in the mortal world. I should think Deva-loka has deteriorated or else how do you account for the fact that when I ask Iravata to kill the former Yama, he chooses to disobey? When even a pachyderm does not listen to my word, who else will? Come to think of it, I would any day prefer to go back to my place at Bhuloka! Excuse my saying so."

The Trinity of Gods smiled at his words. Asked the Gods: "Chitragupta! What does his ledger say?"

"A hundred more years, Lord!" replied he, swallowing a big lump in his throat, wincing at the menacing look of the gambler.

Gods: My boy, we have no objection to your returning to your mortal world, but your body must by now have been burnt. What will you do?

Gambler: Lords! I am not such a fool as not to have stalled it. My body is waiting there in tiptop condition, being embalmed by my wives. Please permit me to return.

Gods: We admire your resourcefulness. We have pleasure in conferring on you the title: "The man who cheated Yama!" Go home and live happily with your wives.

A few seconds later, Rambha heard her name being called out from the box in which her husband's body had been consigned. She opened the box hurriedly and took the smiling gambler fondly in her embrace.

When Chaturya had completed this story, it was nearing daybreak and so he sent the Princess away for the day, asking her "Don't you want to marry a man of this calibre?"

40. RELENTLESS FATE

It was the ninth night and the turn was that of the elder Princess to entertain Chaturya and so she entered the nuptial chamber with a song on her lip. Chaturya invited her to sit on the couch. Preliminaries of a short repast over, the Princess became restless. Chaturya who never lost sight of his mission tried to divert her thoughts by pulling out one more story from his bag for her edification at which the Princess sat back and listened. Said Chaturya:

Long back there lived a King at Champakpur who ruled over his kingdom in the manner adumbrated in the *shastras*. With his Prime Minister, Minister of Intelligence and Defence Minister, he ruled over his subjects justly and fairly. Despite his justness and piety, he had no children for long; but in his later life he got two girls whom he named Jyoti and Lakshmi. When they were seven and five respectively, he had them betrothed to neighbouring princes with great pomp.

While his elder son-in-law chose to live with him, the younger son-in-law stayed but for a few days with him and departed to his own country intending to proceed abroad in quest of adventure.

The two sisters were so devoted to each other that there was no secret with them which they did not share. In course of time, the Princesses came of age which event the King celebrated elaborately, and awaited the other son-in-law for the consummation of his daughters' marriage.

but to allow her do as she wishes. Please therefore arrange for lighting the fire!"

The fire was lit with tons of sandalwood and tins of ghee at the bank of the river near a huge grove and when the tongues of the fire leapt to the skies, Lakshmi went round the fire thrice and uttering the names "Govinda, Madhava!" jumped into the fire while Princes and nobles looked on nervously. But no sooner had she done so than a gale swept over the place bringing a heavy downpour of rain with it which not only quenched the fire but literally washed the field away.

As the royal party fled from the scene on account of the heavy rain, it went with an easy heart that Lakshmi was by now with her husband. But fate had woven its own pattern for her; for, the rain which poured in cascades completely washed her, long before she was thought dead; actually she was washed down into the river and towed like a jetsam downstream for miles together till at last she managed to stand on a patch of wild grass midstream. Looking ahead, she saw a grove and thither she walked in the slush, weary and doddering. When she entered the grove through a slit in the fence, she saw its keeper who happened to be an aged woman before whom she fell down exhausted.

The old woman was first dazed at the sight, for she thought she saw in the new-comer an angel of the forest. But soon she was convinced of her human origin as the new-comer's feet touched the earth squarely. By the time the old woman brought her some edibles and water, Lakshmi had had a quick apprisal of her new situation. Finding her effort to moil herself foiled by fate, she thought there must be some Ulterior Purpose and therefore decided to play her part in the blind drama. She could understand this much, that fate did not want her life to be taken away of her own volition. She would, she thought, conform to that new norm and wait for the next step.

When Princess Lakshmi fully regained consciousness, the old woman asked all about her. Lakshmi replied to her appropriately: "Mother, I and my husband tried to ford the river, but suddenly the rains caught us unawares midstream and we were dragged by the current. I have landed here, but I don't know what has happened to my husband!"

"Daughter!" said the old woman soothingly "Do not worry. I shall make enquiries about your husband round about here, for I know these parts very well. In the meantime you can live with me here as my daughter for as long as you wish."

"I am so grateful to you" replied Lakshmi.

The old woman took her to her cottage, gave her change of clothes and hot gruel.

Now this woman was a florist. It was her custom to collect the flowers from the grove, weave them into garlands and supply them to the royal household of the place. With the money that came out of it she eked out a living. She had no other relative in the world.

One day the old woman brought the flowers from the garden and feeling tired, said to Lakshmi: "My dear, I feel rather tired. Won't you weave the garlands today? I shall take them later on to the palace."

Lakshmi readily agreed and while the old woman had, a nap, Lakshmi sorted out the picks and deft as she was in the art, wove such wonderful garlands out of them in charming colour designs that the old woman was charmed by her performance when she saw them. The old woman walked to the palace with wings in her gait that day. She could hardly contain her pride when she handed over the basket to the Queen who was astonished at the art that went to make those garlands nosegays.

"Who wove these garlands, Maji?" asked the Queen.

"My daughter!" replied the woman scarcely hiding in the tunnel of her mouth revealing the solitary tooth precariously dangling from one side.

"Is that so? How beautiful! Would you bring her here?"

"Sure!" said she and practically ran home. Dressing Lakshmi up for the occasion, the old woman brought her to the Queen who, on seeing Lakshmi, was greatly impressed by her appearance. She said to Lakshmi "My dear girl! You had better stay in the palace itself offering company to my daughters."

The old woman's opaque eyes glinted with pride. The Queen gave rich presents to the old woman for permitting her daughter to remain in the royal household and treated Lakshmi just as another daughter.

One day the King and Queen were gifting *danas*. One of the *danas* consisted of pearl-necklaces. A heap of pearls was handed over to the servants who threaded them into garlands for purposes of making gifts of them.

Lakshmi too offered to join them and taking a quantity of them to a secluded corner, started threading them into fanciful patterns.

After some time the dinner gong went and all of them filed inside. Lakshmi too placed her unfinished pearl-garland in a niche which held a doll-shaped metallic lamp-holder and went inside to join the others in their meals.

But as soon as she went the impish doll in the niche became animated and grabbing at the unfinished pearl-garland threaded by Lakshmi and after gobbling it up stood mute as before.

When Lakshmi returned to her unfinished work, she was shocked not to find the pearl-necklace she had threaded. She made a frantic search for it, questioned the servants but, naturally, every one denied all knowledge of it.

News of this loss reached the Queen's ears in a distorted form, for the servants of the palace were envious of Lakshmi, a florist's daughter, in enjoying the privilege of a princess. Envy knows no barriers, the sense of comparison being the gateway to its realm.

Naturally the Queen became furious: "How could that garland disappear unless it be stolen? And who could have done it except herself? All our other servants have been in this household for generations! I was a fool to have been taken in by her looks, without checking upon her. What a shame!"

The Queen without giving her an opportunity to explain, sentenced her to a severe punishment, according to which Lakshmi's head was to be cleanshaven and she made to work as a lamp-bearer lighting the corridor of the palace.

41. LAKSHMI REJOINS HER HUSBAND

MISFORTUNES do not come singly; they come in battalions. Lakshmi who found some consolation in finding refuge in the florist woman had been emboldened in her belief that her bad days were over when she found a home in a royal household. While patiently awaiting fate to unravel its mystery, however, she was struck by this sudden blow of utter humiliation.

For a full year she spent her life as a degraded serf, a lamp-holder in the royal household.

It so transpired that her husband who was reported as having met with an accident in the middle of the ocean, was in fact waging a sea-battle against a foreign ruler and after a relentless guerilla war, vanquished him. After thus enlarging the field of his sway far and wide, he hastened to Champakpur to communicate his victories and take home his bride. On the way lay this city whose ruler happened to be a brother-in-law of the King of Champakpur and therefore his relative-in-law. Naturally the Prince wanted to break his journey for a day here and proceed to his father-in-law's place the next day.

As soon as he sent word to the King, he along with proper retinue received the Prince with due decorum and lavished all the affection and respect due to a son-in-law. It may be reminded here that no word about Lakshmi's fate or her missing husband had been received by these people and Lakshmi herself had no knowledge that she was staying in the palace of her aunt. Lack of proper transport and communication in those days had made quick dissemination of news difficult.

After day-long entertainment, the guest was put in a luxurious bedroom for the night and poor Lakshmi was assigned the duty of waiting upon the august guest with the lamp. As soon as the Prince saw the disfigured girl with the lamp, he was struck by her regal appearance in spite of the cruelty done to her. The Prince being well-versed in the laws of *samudrikashastra* could easily confirm his suspicions about her and therefore decided to interrogate her.

Asked he: "Woman! Who are you? Why are you here doing this menial job? To me you appear to be of royal blood!"

Lakshmi bent her head lower still on hearing these words and lest she should be subject to heavier punishment remained mute. The Prince repeated his question and gently assured her that no harm would befall her: he would see to it.

At last, Lakshmi started weeping as she unburdened her heart to him with her whole story.

It may be remarked here that as they were married while in their teens they did not recognise each other at all. For Lakshmi's part she almost believed that her husband was no more, while the Prince had little suspicion that anything of the kind that did, would have happened to her. Hence the mutual ignorance.

As soon as he heard the story, however, the Prince recognised the girl as his own bride and felt angry that she had been shabbily treated by her own people. He felt it as an insult unto himself. Deciding to reveal himself, the Prince said: "Woman! I am the unfortunate husband of yours. I went abroad seeking lands and fame and did succeed in earning lots of them. Leaving my kingdom at the hands of my Minister, I came posthaste to you to take you away. This country being on the way and the King being your father's brother-in-law, I thought it was my duty to call on him and pay my respects to him. But what do I find? You are being humiliated by your own people which I take as an insult to myself, being your husband. While I greatly sympathise with you, we should not feel overwhelmed. We should now think of the future."

Lakshmi who could not believe her ears slowly made bold to look up at the brave Prince. Amidst warring emotions, she intuitively felt that he could not be an impostor; for she recalled poet Kalidasa's dictum:

सतां हि सन्देहपदेषु वस्तुषु प्रमाणमन्तःकरणप्रवृत्तयः (for the good, their conscience will be the safest guide in matters of doubt) and felt sure he was her husband. When the two felt sure of each other, the Prince sent word to his own party and arranged to have Lakshmi duly bathed, dressed up and taken straightaway to his palanquin waiting at his camp. It was done.

Not finding the Prince come out of his bedroom even though it was late in the morning, the Queen and her maids tapped at the door when the Prince came out to open it for them. While the Queen kept at a respectful distance from the son-in-law, the Prince packed up his things and started leaving in a huff without even wishing her. He wore a scowl on his face which made it clear that the Prince was angry. Unable to account for his anger, the Queen ran up to her husband, the King, who came down and pleaded with the Prince to extend his stay and receive his hospitality when the Prince replied: "I shall not stay a minute longer at your place, nor would I drink a drop of water from your hands."

"Why so angry, son?" pleaded the King.

The Prince looked back at the King and replied: "Do you remember there is a kingdom called Champakpur whose King is your wife's sister's husband?"

"Sure!" replied the King. Continuing he said: "And that is why you are here as our relative and guest and why we ask you to extend your stay!"

"A very nice way, indeed, of entertaining a son-in-law by shaving his wife's head and making her hold the lamp in attendance upon her husband!" said the Prince.

"What do you mean? Will you explain yourself, son?" asked the King.

"Listen!" replied the Prince. "You know I married the second girl of Champakpur. Now, while I had gone out on my adventure, word got around that I was dead and my wife in trying to commit *sati* was saved by a downpour." And he completed the story indicting the King and his wife for their cruelty to their own niece.

"I am so sorry, believe me Prince. Do you think we would have done that to our own girl, had we known her?" pleaded the King.

"That still does not absolve you from your nasty treatment. In any case, the indignity has been committed and I naturally do not want to be under your roof any longer."

Saying this, the Prince walked out of the palace briskly and reaching his camp, started to Champakpur with his retinue which carried Lakshmi in a palanquin.

As soon as he arrived at Champakpur, he sent word to his father-in-law who, greatly pleased at the news, came out and received him with proper honours. After some rest, the Prince went to the King's State-room where he was surrounded by his Ministers and other nobles. At that time the Prince related to them how he conquered many lands and how on his way to claim his bride, he met his own wife unexpectedly at the palace of the King's brother-in-law in a humiliating condition, and how after feeling affronted he had come there, bringing his bride.

The King felt immensely happy that his daughter was after all not dead, although for a moment his eyes became wet at the indignities she had had to suffer at her aunt's. Attributing it all to the manipulation of fate, he ran to where his daughter was kept in the palanquin and together with his wife and other members of the family shed tears of joy over her. The King then duly arranged for the consummation of the marriage of his daughter, after which the Prince and Lakshmi lived happily.

After staying some time in the palace, the Prince asked his father-in-law for a separate palace for himself and his wife to stay. The King readily placed one at his disposal and furnished it exquisitely. He gave them plenty of money to lead a regal and full life.

While the two spent a life that was the envy of the capital, impish fate started weaving its own pattern for them, for, the Prince soon succumbed to the wiles of a danseuse who lived outside the precincts of the town. Often he stayed out at night. This did not escape the shrewd Lakshmi. Yet brought up as she was in the best Indian tradition, she continued to remain devoted to her husband, without in the least being affronted by his waywardness.

42. THE LOVE - POTION

Of all senses, the sense of possession is the fiercest, particularly among the female of the species. The danseuse was chagrined to find that her parmour found time and the inclination to go home and stay during the day. Lakshmi's patience only tended to exasperate her. Wanting to put a stop to that too she had recourse to that fabled step—administering the love-potion—which had the desired result.

As a result, the Prince came home only for his food and bath, spending the rest of the day too with the danseuse.

Not at all disheartened, Lakshmi became more resolute of her purpose to continue to be devoted to her husband without raising her little finger.

Things went on in this manner for three consecutive years.

Lakshmi had for her neighbour an old woman who was an adept in the ways of the world and in black magic too.

She came to Lakshmi one day and said: "My child! You are quite young, have good looks and yet your husband frequents houses of ill-fame! What kind of wife is she who is unable to control her husband?"

"What can I do, mother!" replied Lakshmi. "When Brahma created me, he wrote on my skull that I should suffer thus!"

"Do not blame Brahma. He did his work all right. It is your foolishness that makes you suffer. Look! If you listen to my advice, you will have no reason to regret."

"What should I do? Please tell me."

"Here, take this love-potion. Mix this in the food which you offer to your husband. He will not part from you for a second," said the old woman and departed.

Taking the vial containing the potion, Lakshmi reflected: "If the potion does the work as told by her, it is well and good. Suppose it does not, and instead, harm him; what shall I do? Won't it be better to have my husband hale and hearty even though he be wayward rather than permanently harming him?"

Thus being influenced negatively, Lakshmi spilt the potion on a dung-heap at her back-yard.

Now, a serpent lived under the dung-heap and a few particles of that potion percolated on to it which it licked and consequently became enamoured of Lakshmi.

That *nag* wanted to meet Lakshmi.

Knowing the fate that would meet him if he went in his real form, the *nag* waited till the Prince departed to the danseuse's house and taking the form of the prince, her husband, tapped at Lakshmi's door.

When she opened it, she was agreeably surprised to find her husband come back so soon after his departure.

She blessed her stars that her husband had turned to her. She wondered if the potion which just passed through her hands had brought about that miraculous effect. If that could do that much, how wonderful would it have been had she mixed the potion in her husband's food! He would never have parted from her. Her breast heaved with expectant pleasure and after years of missed happiness she had the company of her "husband" for the entire night when, her cup of joy was full to the brim.

Lakshmi carried on with the serpent, blissfully ignorant of the identity of its person and thinking all the while that it was her husband and none else. As a result of this association she became *enceinte*. As soon as the serpent came to know of her condition he wanted to tell her the truth if only to seek her permanent company. So he told her: "My love! Take this sacred ash. I shall now take a strange form. Do not get frightened by it but throw this ash on me. I shall be tamed and take another form and tell you some interesting things."

Going away for a few seconds, he returned in his real shape of a hooded serpent hissing ferociously. At first sight, Lakshmi shrieked with terror, but recollecting what her "husband" had asked, she threw some of the sacred ash on the hood of the serpent at which the latter became tame and soon after, turned back into the Prince. Taking her by the hand, he took Lakshmi to the couch and seating her comfortably threw his hand round her waist.

"I never knew, my Lord, that you were so powerful as all this," said Lakshmi.

Looking at her eyes, the serpent said: "Lakshmi! I am not your real husband. He is now in the embrace of the danseuse. I am the five-hooded serpent living at the back of your house. You remember throwing hastily the love-potion that the neighbouring old lady gave you? Now when you threw it, it fell on me and as a result of drinking it, I was drawn to you like this. It was I who had been kidding you all these days. Now, I am going to do you a good turn. I am going to break the infatuation of your husband to that wretched woman and bring him back to you."

And he left, leaving Lakshmi more alarmed than ever.

As Lakshmi was fairly advanced in her motherhood, her appearance struck the real Prince as odd.

He therefore went to his father-in-law and complained that his wife was being unfaithful to him as evidenced by her condition, as he had not even touched her for years now.

The vagaries of grown-up children are a permanent source of embarrassment to parents and this being a delicate issue, the King wanted to send experienced nurses to examine Lakshmi and report to him. When the latter came to inform her of her father's desire, Lakshmi gave them an appointment on the next day and sought the serpent-king's advice that night when they were alone.

The serpent laughed and replied: "Be of good cheer that your bad days are over. Let the King know of your true condition and should he challenge you, tell him firmly that your husband alone is the father of the child that is within you. Should people fail to believe you, as most certainly they will, offer to swear on oath before any deity. Better still, offer to do this: let them keep a serpent bottled and you offer to retrieve a gold coin from the container in attestation of your fidelity. This should completely disabuse them of any lingering suspicion. I will of course manage to be that serpent. Don't worry" and left.

At day break, Lakshmi put on her best dress and appeared before her father asking "Father! Why did you want me to be examined by the nurses?"

The King bent his head low at her appearance, and directed her to speak to her husband who, flushed with excitement, addressed the King thus: "How is it, King, that while it is over two years since I had touched her, your daughter is bearing a child?"

It was a small council that was present at the room and so, addressing her audience, Lakshmi replied in a firm tone: "I do not want to take much of your time arguing over this matter beyond stating that it is most unfortunate for an aspersion like this to be cast on my character. Clear as I am in my conscience, I am willing to vouch for my innocence by undertaking the *sarpa-satya*."

There was pin-drop silence at the dramatic turn of the enquiry and there was no option for the council except to accept her offer.

The Prince on his part was jubilant that the truth will be out.

A snake-charmer was immediately sent for. He came and started playing his pipe to attract a serpent. Soon, to the astonishment of all, a fivehooded serpent came majestically forward and to the piper's bidding, entered the big pot which was kept ready, inside of which a gold coin had been dropped.

The pot was sealed as soon as the serpent entered it. Lakshmi went to a nearby river, bathed and returning in her wet clothes, went round the pot thrice and uttering "On the day of my marriage I touched my husband's hand. With the same hand I shall touch this serpent!", she removed the seal from the pot, thrust her hands into it, took out the huge serpent, threw it round her neck, took out the gold coin and going round the council, deposited the coin on the golden platter kept for the purpose, while the council stood terror-stricken.

When she deposited the serpent into the pot back again, all of them praised Lakshmi for her virtuosity.

And the Prince too was dazed into believing that he must be the father of her child.

43. LAKSHMI REUNITED

MYSTERY, explained or otherwise, is an effective psychological cover for human infirmities, at any rate, for the large masses. It has helped them down the ages in their evolution. Lakshmi owed her rehabilitation to that snake which symbolizes her inhibition, as a result of which, she forgot her sorrows and at the completion of nature's ten months, gave birth to a glorious boy. The snake took the form of a nurse and looked after Lakshmi during her confinement. As soon as she was fit, the snake presented her and the child with costly jewels and taking leave of the King went away.

When the child was three years old, the Prince came to Lakshmi's place one day and took his meals. While there, he looked at the child playing in a pram. The light that emanated from the child was so dazzling that it blinded his eyes for a moment. Turning away from it, he finished his meals and returned to the danseuse's residence which he had made his permanent abode.

Apparently the Prince must have spoken to the danseuse about the child; for, she sent word to Lakshmi the next day to bring her child for her to see. When the danseuse's messengers came to Lakshmi with her request, Lakshmi asked them to come on the next day. When the messengers returned with this answer, the danseuse was piqued and she reported it to the Prince in the 'proper' manner which infuriated him. Thought he: "If I send for my son, how can she refuse to send him?" He promptly lodged a protest with his father-in-law against his wife's conduct in thus refusing to send him his son.

That night Lakshmi called the snake-King and said: "This morning the danseuse asked for my son and I have asked her messenger to come tomorrow. What shall I do?"

Replied the snake: "Your good days are before you now. Not only will your husband return to you, but the danseuse of her own accord will dispossess herself from your husband's affections. Deck your child with all ornaments and send him to your father. When the messengers come, weigh the child along with the ornaments correctly. Tell them that they should return him intact in his weight. If the weight is less, she must make good the loss or she must agree to dispossess herself and become your slave. The ornaments of your child being made of *nag-ratna*, even your father's treasury will not be equal in value to them. I shall manage to take away the *nag-ratnas* from the child while in her custody. And your way will thus become clear."

When the messengers of the danseuse presented themselves the next morning the King sent for his second daughter. Asked the messenger of her: "Madam! Your husband wants to see his child. He has sent us to bring him to our mistress's place."

Lakshmi replied: "Father! I have no objection. All that I fear is that he may be robbed of his precious jewels. I suggest that the child be weighed here now along with his jewels. If he is returned to me in the same weight with all his jewels intact, I shall be satisfied. Failure to do so would entail the danseuse to dispossess herself completely and become my slave."

The other party being agreeable to that condition, the child was handed over after proper weighing. As soon as the child came home, the danseuse fondled it, caressed it, played with it the whole day and kept him with her for the night too. The snake made its way into the household according to plan, at dead of night and stole away some of the costliest jewels the child wore.

When the child was returned on the following day, Lakshmi insisted that he be weighed before being accepted. When they did so, it was found that he weighed less. It was a great shock to the danseuse. The matter was reported to a *panchayat* who ruled that the danseuse should act according to the agreement. Without the least compunction, the danseuse dispossessed herself completely of all her wealth and belongings and cheerfully became Lakshmi's slave.

After this, Lakshmi's husband too had to return to Lakshmi's place. Soon she was restored in the affections of her husband while the danseuse did their bidding as a domestic slave.

In her new-found joy, Lakshmi completely forgot the snake. He became angry. He had half a mind to kill the woman for her ingratitude by biting her. But it went against his grain. To try to make love to her now, too, was revolting inasmuch as her husband had returned to her. The best way under the circumstances would be for him to commit suicide, he thought, if only in atonement for his past sins. That he decided to do by strangling himself with her own lock of hair. So, one night while she was asleep by the side of the Prince, the snake went up to her head and entering her lock of hair strangled itself to death.

When in the morning the Prince woke up, he was horrified to find a dead snake dangling from his wife's head. When he woke her up, she found her head heavy with the weight of the dead snake. As soon as she saw it, it flashed across her mind that the snake did so out of remorse and a film of tears covered her eyes. Wiping it off she said to her husband: "O, this is our home-snake. We worship him. I had prayed to him for your return and had agreed to offer him *puja* on your return. Apparently it came to remind me of it but got enmeshed in my hair and died."

"I am so sorry to hear it," replied her husband. "What shall we do now?" asked he.

"There is only one way; we had better have it buried prayerfully and let our son pour some milk over the grave. That will be the best we can do now" said Lakshmi.

"All right. Let us do so", replied the Prince and had their son do the obsequial ceremonies of the snake.

From then on the Prince, Lakshmi and the child lived happily.

Finding that it was time for daybreak, Chaturya winked at the Princess by his side and said: "Aren't women very clever in hoodwinking their husbands?" and sent her to the palace.

44. AMRITAVALLI

It was the tenth night and it was the turn of the younger Princess to keep Chaturya's company. As usual she had come attired most alluringly for the occasion. When it was clear that she could contain her passion no more, Chaturya who did not lose his sense of mission even for a second, switched on to his favourite game of story-telling. And he told her the following story to which she listened with rapt attention.

There was a city by name Mandala over which King Vilasa ruled. Both he and his Minister did not have any issues for a long time. After due propitiation, each of them got a son. They were given the kind of education most suited to them and in time they became adepts in the royal arts. And above all, the two youngsters took to each other well.

As it happened, the King's son was not only charming to look at, but also had a nobility of character that far outshone other embellishments. Unlike him, however, the Minister's son was *tamasic* by nature as well as disposition. What was worse, courage was significantly absent from him, so much so the Minister-father felt greatly annoyed with himself for producing a son so unlike himself.

Finding that the country at that time, had little use for them, the two youngsters thought of spending their youthful days usefully by employing themselves in some adventurous pursuit, so that they could not merely make a name for themselves, but gain first-hand experience of life too.

Getting the assent of their parents the two youngsters set out on their best steeds, carrying necessary funds to expend on the journey.

For long did they travel, crossing hills, dales and dense forests till they reached the capital of Kalinga. There they sought the home of an old worldly-wise woman where they sought board and lodge for themselves and their horses at a cost of one gold coin per day.

On the fourth day, they entered into a conversation with the landlady whom they asked: "Mother! Is there anything particular that we can see or hear in this city which is of more than passing interest?"

Replied she: "Yes my sons, I can tell you of something of extraordinary interest. The King's daughter, Amritavalli, had some time back gone out to a bathing pool along with her attendants. She is extremely good-looking by the way. Well, strange to say, as she was bathing, a mysterious elephant appeared there and decoyed her into his ambush which, later on, proved to be impenetrable. Its hideous, they say, is a four-tiered delta, each of which is guarded by packs of wolves, jackals, tigers and elephants respectively. Consequently the King has announced that anyone who rescues his daughter from the den will be given her hand in marriage besides a half of his Kingdom."

The youngsters thought this was ideal grist for their mill; at any rate the King's son thought so. Between them they decided to have a go at this rescue operation and with it, win fame and glory. Finishing their meals quickly. they put on their best dress and rode to the King's durbar.

The King received them, heard their offer and willingly gave them permission to go upon that quest, reassuring them that he would be as good as his word, so far as his part of the contract was concerned. The King gave them a map whereon he marked the place where his daughter had been ambushed and also the den.

The two youngsters sped on relentlessly into the dense forest for a long time, till at last the topography showed that they were nearing the first tier. No sooner had they known it, than a host of wolves which had been alerted by the prancing hooves of the steeds, converged on them raising a cloud of dust. This sudden onslaught literally dumbfounded the Minister's son who could simply look on, as his motor nerves refused to function. Soon the pack fell on them and started tearing and biting them. Even then, the Minister's son could not think of doing something to protect himself!

Knowing as he did his friend, the Prince whacked the other on the back and crying 'Bravo!' whipped his sword round and all about him so dexterously that the heads of hundreds of wolves fell down as though held in a string. Soon he succeeded in hewing and hacking the pack, and the sky reverberated with the howls of the wounded wolves which ran for life.

Prodding his dumbfounded friend, the Prince entered the second tier which was guarded by jackals. When those ferocious looking animals blew fire through their nostrils and snarled infernally, the Minister's son literally fell down from his mount in a swoon. Laughing inwardly, the Prince wielded his sword with greater speed and succeeded in slaying most of the animals while the rest took to flight. It was getting dark. So, the Prince got down from his horse, awoke his friend and after assuaging his fears, the two went into a neighbouring village for a wash, grub and a restful night.

As they wended their way, they saw a tiger caught in the marsh. As they tried to ignore it, the tiger called out to them imploringly: "Sirs! I am the King of tigers and by a misfortune caught in this mess for eight days now. If you don't help me out, I shall most surely die, for no one comes this way. Please save me and I shall be eternally indebted to you."

The two friends looked at each other dubiously and finally the Prince addressed it: "O Tiger! Even the Vedas say, do not help the wild animal lest it should harm you. I shall however help you if you promise me on oath that you won't harm us!"

The tiger did so and between them the two friends pulled the tiger out of the marsh by climbing on a tree whose branches had arched over the quagmire. The tiger expressed its gratefulness to them when the Prince asked the tiger: "You can do me a favour right now. You know that the Princess of Kalinga has been ambushed and one of the tiers in that hideout is guarded by tigers. Now, could you ask your subjects the tigers that do duty there, to forsake their post? I shall be obliged."

The tiger not only agreed but added, "Should, at any time, you are in difficulty and need my help, think of me and I shall stand before you. I have that much power."

The tiger was as good as its word. It went to the den and talked to the tiger-guards: "Listen! You are foolish to stand at your post, knowing the fate of the jackals and wolves which have been despatched to the other world by the brave Prince. Please therefore allow discretion to become the better part of your valour and make yourselves, all of you, scarce, right now or it will be too late before the Prince is on the scene. Be gone!" And all the tigers left their post.

After a restful night at the village, the Prince asked the Minister's son to stay back and went alone to the den.

Agreeably surprised to find the third tier unguarded, he entered the fourth, guarded by elephants. The Prince plunged into their midst and wielding his sword with lightning rapidity hacked elephant after elephant so grievously that they could no more menace or ban his passage.

As he proceeded ahead, he saw at the back of a cave, the huge form of the elephant-King sprawled over and deeply snoring. Without delaying for a minute, he ran towards it and cleft its head asunder by a single flash of his sword. The elephant died instantaneously.

When the Prince wiped his forehead whom should he see standing a little afar but the Princess, looking glorious like the full moon?

45. MAN PROPOSES, BUT . . .

THE Princess of Kalinga who had lost all hopes of release from her captivity was agreeably surprised to see a handsome Prince standing ahead of her, presumably a co-prisoner. Even that was welcome to her, since two were better than one in prison.

The Prince on the other hand feared that the Princess might suspect him to be her real captor at whose bidding the elephant had decoyed her. So, desiring to allay her apprehension, he shouted even from afar: "Princess! Do not fear! I am come to deliver you from this prison. I have come here with the permission of your father. The elephant is dead as dodo even as all the other guards. I have despatched the whole pack of them to Yama's kingdom. So, be not afraid, I am your friend!"

The Princess was dumbfounded by the revelation and as soon as he came near her, she expressed her gratefulness to him, whereupon he asked her to follow him to her father's capital. On the way they saw the carcasses of the beasts slain by the Prince before they reached the place where the Minister's son had been left behind.

After taking food, they spent the night at that place, and by morning all three started towards the capital. The Prince took the Princess on his steed and before noon the party reached the frontiers of Kalinga.

It was high noon and the Prince felt thirsty and so, leaving the Princess to the care of his friend, the Minister's son, and asking him to keep guard with his drawn sword lest any untoward accident should happen, he left for a nearby river to quench his thirst.

That spot happened to be frequented by a demon belonging to the nether world. That being was of enormous size, he almost measured up to the sky in height and was mountainous in girth.

As soon therefore as he saw the young Princess and the Minister's son staying alone, his nostrils opened wide as saliva started flowing down his tongue at the prospect of a luscious food. He made such a noise out of delight that the animals round about took to heels at the highest speed and the birds fell down from tree-tops like drops of rain.

The Princess and the Minister's son who were startled by the noise looked in the direction and the sight of the mountainous demon froze their tongues. The Minister's son went on further: he threw the sword he was holding, on the ground and pushing the Princess right before the demon, himself fell flat on his face on mother-earth holding his breath tightly.

The demon laughed thunderously and taking the Princess between his left thumb and first finger, kicked the prostrate figure of the Minister's son who feigned death. Spitting at him, the demon disappeared beneath the earth with the Princess, whom he took to his abode to keep company with the Princess of Kalakanthpur whom he had earlier abducted.

When the Prince returned, he was shocked not to find the Princess of Kalinga on his horse and his friend lying down more dead than alive. He ran towards him and shaking him by the collar, asked "It is me, your friend! What ails you? Where is the Princess? Tell me, friend!"

The Minister's son refused to open his eyes saying "Is there nobody else about?"

"No! None but me. What is the matter? Tell me, quickly!" urged the Prince.

The Minister's son sat up at last and replied: "O! What shall I say, Prince? As soon as you went, a demon as big as a mountain appeared from nowhere and tried to swallow us. I became so terrified by it that I pushed the Princess before it and fell flat on my face throwing my sword. I do not know what has happened to the Princess. Indeed I did not know if I was alive until you shook me up!"

The Prince felt that all his earlier efforts had been blasted by one stroke. For a second, he felt completely at sea. But his inborn courage returned to him as he said: "Look, there is no point in crying over spilt milk. It is futile too to return to Kalinga to report to the King as it will not take us anywhere. Let me think over my next step furiously. Jump on your steed and let us jog along for some time."

As they proceeded on horseback, they came to the marshy place where the Prince formerly met the tiger-king. This naturally brought the memory of tiger-king to the Prince's mind. No sooner had he thought of it than it stood before him—as it had promised. Asked the tiger-king of the Prince: "Does anything ail you, son? Your face seems to be sad!"

"You are right, friend," replied the Prince and related to him the circumstances under which the Princess of Kalinga was all but lost to him.

The tiger-king, being supernatural, could easily divine the place where the Kalinga Princess had been taken. Said he to the Prince: "Prince! The Princess has been decoyed to the Patal Lok by a demon. He has already kept another Princess, the daughter of King Kalakanthpur. Now, you go to Kalakanthpur, meet the King and offer to bring back his daughter. He will gladly agree. Ask him to supply you with a ten-million *yojana* long iron chain. He will supply. Bring that to me here. I shall tell you what to do next later" and disappeared.

Accordingly the Prince and his friend rode to Kalakanthpur. Having audience with the King, the Prince offered to rescue his daughter. The King was delighted to hear it. He entertained them to lavish food. Said the Prince: "King! I shall no doubt succeed in my effort, but I require a ten-million *yojana* long iron chain for use in that context."

"Of course," replied the King and put all the blacksmiths of his State on the job.

As soon as the chain was ready, he handed it over to the Prince who, along with his friend, carried it to the place where the tiger-king had asked them to meet.

The tiger was there waiting for them.

46. THE DOUBLE-CROSS

WHEN the two royal pals saw the tiger-king waiting for them, their joy overflowed. They whipped their horses which galloped towards the spot.

Descending from their horses, the Prince offered obeisance to the miraculous tiger and placed the huge iron-chain which they had brought, before it.

The tiger beamed with satisfaction and sent its orderly with a summons to call all the beasts of its kingdom to report before it immediately. Very soon all of them did. The tiger ordered them all to dig a tunnel to the nether world and all the animals plunged into the task and in a short period succeeded in constructing a tunnel.

The sense of mystery and the improbable are the inalienable right of human curiosity. The measure of its presence is the measure of youthfulness present in a man or woman. And who would not like to continue being youthful? That explains the popularity of harmless stories like this. Another explanation is this. All stories are unreal; why not a superlatively unreal story like this?

As soon as the tunnel was ready, the tiger asked the Prince to let the chain down the tunnel so as to serve as a rope-ladder, and said: "Prince, this chain will lead you to Patal-lok where the Princess of Kalinga has been taken. Descend along the chain carefully and you will land on a plain where the two Princesses are kept in custody. You have to reckon with the demon which you must kill before achieving your objective."

Asking the minister's son to wait outside on earth, the Prince armed himself with his magic sword and quickly descended into the tunnel along the suspended chain. He passed through densely dark passages for a long time until at last he saw light and landed on what looked like a flat surface. On the other side of it he was happy to find the two Princesses in lively conversation in the hollow of a giant tree.

Alighting from the chain, he briskly walked towards them. When he neared them, Amritavalli, the Kalinga Princess, saw him, when her face became animated with astonishment. But the next moment it became worried.

Snatching herself away from the other girl, Amritavalli walked towards the Prince and held the Prince's hand. Said she apprehensively, "This place is the lair of the demon. He is expected at any moment. Please hide yourself somewhere quickly. As soon as he partakes of food, however, the demon goes to sleep when you should cut him into two, lengthwise, and reverse the halves, lest they join together. Then only can we be rescued."

And the demon came, ate his cartload of food, made the Princess partake of some fruits and later according to custom, spread its huge body on the floor and started snoring. The girls did not give room for any suspicion.

At a signal from Amritavalli, the Prince came out of his hideout and walking on tip-toe, neared the demon sprawled on the floor and with one stroke of his sword cleft its body into two and transposed the two halves according to instructions.

When the demon was thus disposed of, the Prince approached the two Princesses who looked at him admiringly. They signified their consent in starting whereon the Prince sent them up to the earth one by one along the chain by which he had descended. Having landed them safely the Prince climbed the iron rope.

While the Prince was half-way up, the Minister's son atop the tunnel became so infatuated with the two Princesses that he decided to have the girls for himself. Not for nothing have the ancients decried women and wealth as the curse of humanity. Ignoring all other considerations, the Minister's son quietly cut off the chain-rope, whereupon the Prince who was half-way up the tunnel, hurtled down to unfathomable depth and almost battered himself to death.

The Minister's son, hearing the thud, did an excellent piece of acting. Wringing his hands in disguised agony he cried: "O, my friend! What ill-fate should pursue you to have thus fallen down! Fie upon me! Why should that rope give way when you had almost come to the end of your labours? O God! What shall I say to your father and mother?"

The two Princesses too felt dazed at the unexpected calamity and did not know what to do.

After some time, the Minister's son appeared to have recovered from his grief and addressed the Princesses: "Ladies! What is the use of grieving over the past! I think it was God's will that this should happen. Be not afraid. I shall safely conduct you to your fathers. You may take me as your deliverer."

So saying, the Minister's son led them on horses to Kalinga. On the way, the Minister's son tried to endear himself to the Princesses by pleasant banter and even became romantic. In short, he made approaches to them short of becoming indecent.

Stopping at the outskirts of Kalinga, he sent word to the King that his daughter had returned along with her rescuer. The royal household was overjoyed and a royal party headed by the King himself came to where he waited and received him with exemplary honour.

In the effusion of his happiness the King did not notice that the so-called rescuer was different from the Prince who took the iron rope from him. Further, the King had seen the Prince only for a short period.

Seeing another Princess by the side of his daughter, the King of Kalinga asked: "Who is the other lady?"

"She is the Princess of Kalakanthpur who had been decoyed by the demon earlier!" replied the Minister's son.

"O! I remember your telling me about it. Now, did you have a stiff fight with the demon?" asked the King.

"O, not much. The demon no doubt was normally invincible. But by the grace of God and the luck of your daughter, I could dispose of him quickly!" replied the impostor.

47. AMRITAVALLI MARRIES

THE King of Kalinga felt gratified that his daughter Amritavalli was safely back and the demon who had decoyed her had been killed. So, he took the Minister's son on a caparisoned elephant in a procession through the city and followed him along with his daughter and the Princess of Kalakanthpur on rich palanquins. Reaching the palace, he entertained the whole city to a rich repast in token of his joy.

For some days the Minister's son lived in the palace as a valued guest and on an auspicious day the King gave away half his kingdom as per his promise to the Minister's son and coronated him King.

After this event he called the Minister's son and asked: "My son! I want to fulfil the next part of my contract too. I want to give my daughter away to you in marriage and I believe you would naturally want to marry the other Princess too, being her deliverer".

"I am at your service" replied the Minister's son.

When, however, the King approached the Princesses, they said: "We would like to observe Gowri Vrata before marrying. It will take six months for its completion."

When the King communicated their desire to the Minister's son he had no other alternative but to accept the inevitable.

Let us now follow the Prince who fell down unconscious at the Patal-lok. For quite a long time, he remained unconscious. When, however, the cool and bracing breeze of the nether world wafted over his face, he slowly regained power over his senses and, not being too hurt providentially, he was able to sit up and recall the events. Being under the impression that the rope-chain broke accidentally, he rued his own fate. But being a man of courage, he took recourse to the one way left: he entered into Yoga-samadhi, seeking divine help. For a full month, he remained in that state and when he reached the point of exhaustion, Lord Siva, accompanied by Parvati, appeared before him.

The Prince opened his eyes and seeing the Divine Pair, fell at their feet which he made wet by his tears of joy.

Asked Siva: "My son! Ask of me of any boon you may require!"

"Lord! What else do I require now, but get away from this place? Please give me a Garuda form to enable me to fly out of the nether world and reach Bhuloka where I may regain my form!"

"So be it!" blessed the Lord and disappeared.

Assuming Garuda form, the Prince flew through the giant aperture through which he had descended and reached Bhuloka. Not finding either the Princesses or his friend at the mouth, the Prince took to wings and flew to Kalakanthpur where he alighted. Regaining his human form, the Prince sought board and lodge in the home of an old woman and got them.

Meals over he sat on the pial of her home and asked her, "Mother! Could you tell me of anything of extraordinary interest about this city?"

"Oh Yes!" replied she and said: "The King of this city had a beautiful daughter. Some months back, a demon had abducted her to the nether world and for a long time we did not hear of her. Suddenly one day a Prince from some other country came to the King and offering to rescue the Princess, took from him miles of rope-chain. But nothing has been heard of him and of the Princess since that day!"

From this conversation, he was able to gather that the Minister's son had not returned to Kalakanthpur but, possibly, had gone to Kalinga. So, early in the morning he payed off the old woman and taking leave of her, walked briskly in the direction of Kalinga. For ten days he trudged along, crossing mountains and valleys, swimming across rivers. At last he reached a village on the border of Kalinga where, exhausted by the strenuous journey, he fell unconscious before a house.

That house belonged to a Brahmin who coming out saw the fallen man and exclaimed: "He seems to be a Prince and fallen unconscious for lack of food, due perhaps to some misfortune!"

Calling out to his wife, he asked her to bring some cool water and the milk-pudding which he had dedicated to his deity a short while ago. He fed the Prince tenderly with that rich food whereon the Prince regained consciousness. Explaining that he had to go without food for ten days, he expressed his desire to have some more food. The Brahmin promptly took him inside the house and fed him with a rich variety of food.

When he was thus refreshed, the Prince asked the Brahmin: "Sir! Is there anything of extraordinary interest in your country?"

The Brahmin thought for a while and replied: "Yonder is the capital where the King has his seat. Some months ago an elephant—you will be surprised to hear—had abducted the King's daughter and kept her closely guarded. Recently a Prince like you had killed the elephant, rescued the Princess and brought her back to the King. The King who was overjoyed, gave away half his Kingdom to that Prince and made preparations for the marriage of his daughter with that brave Prince. I think it was part of the contract. It seems that Prince had rescued another girl too in the same exploit. Now, would you believe it—the girls said they were not ready for the marriage and went on a vow, performing Gowri-Vrata!"

"So, that is the story!" thought the Prince who could now understand the perfidious character of his friend. As it was, the situation had not quite gone out of control; he could still play the trumpcard, decided the Prince.

After staying for two or three days in the home of the Brahmin, the Prince started towards the capital after entrusting the princely paraphernalia to the Brahmin's care.

Soon after entering the city, he gathered that the Minister's son had set up spies to be on the look out for a prince of his description and to put to death any one found of that description. The Prince gasped with surprise. But he was not to be out-done.

He contemplated on the tiger-King whereon, the animal stood before him. With its help, the Prince disguised himself as a dance-instructress and managed to get the tuition of Princess Amritavalli. By his excellent talks, he soon gained her confidence and one day he revealed himself in his true form, when Amritavalli became immensely joyous and exclaimed: "Gowri has granted our prayer," and bowed before her liberator, wondering all the time at his ingenuity in gaining admission into her harem. She promptly confided her discovery to her mate, the other Princess from captivity.

After the Prince had resumed his dance-teacher form, Amritavalli related to him *tete-a-tete* all that had taken place since his friend's scuttling; his overtures to them and their own final strategy. The Prince on his part related all that had happened to him since they met last. The three shed tears of joy. They programmed a plan of action on the spot and according to it the two girls expressed their readiness for the marriage to the King.

Preparation for the marriage went round the clock—the interval being too short. Invitations had been sent out to all dignitaries and Kings of neighbouring kingdoms. The day arrived. All important invitees had arrived and were suitably lodged. The father of the impostor was one among them, as also the King of Kalakanthpur who fully endorsed what the King of Kalinga did.

On the marriage-day, the bridegroom, i.e., the Minister's son, rode on the state-elephant. Asked to accompany him on the same elephant, the two girls expressed their preference to ride separately on another elephant. When people heard of it, they looked at each other meaningfully.

Procession over, the bridegroom sat before the marriage-fire and when the *mangal-sutra* was handed to the bridegroom, Princess Amritavalli stood up and addressing the Acharya who officiated, said: "Please stop giving it to him and hear me say a few words to the assembly."

Princess Amritavalli bowed profoundly to the august audience and asking for their indulgence exposed in pindrop silence the perfidy of the Minister's son who sat before the Vedi. In the end, she said: "I have an unchallengeable proof in the person of my dance-teacher who will now vouch for all the statements I made."

As she said, the dance-mistress stood before the assembly. After bowing respectfully, she threw off the veil that surrounded her body and revealed the immaculate personality of the Prince! The whole audience was dumbfounded. Asking the excited people to sit down the Prince introduced himself and confirmed all what Amritavalli said and when he ended his peroration, the priest was shocked to see the Minister's son falling down unconscious. Before people could mount the rostrum to belabour the impostor, he was removed to safety and the Prince was made to occupy the seat vacated by the Minister's son. The Prince tied the *mangal-sutra* on the neck of both the girls whose eyes danced with joy.

Then Chaturya asked the Princess "Don't you too want a husband like that Prince?" It was day-break and the Princess rose and went inside the palace.

48. IN SEARCH OF LORD SIVA

It was the turn of the elder Princess next night. When she therefore entered the nuptial chamber with all the accoutrements of the occasion Prince Chaturya smiled at her out of compassion.

As usual the Princess gave him the choice dishes she had brought, and by the time he had finished eating, he could see unmistakable signs of the rising tempo of her passion. Recalling the nature of his mission he decided to put her off again by springing upon her a story to which she listened with rapt attention. He said:

In the capital of Kalinga there lived a poor Brahmin who eked his living by begging for alms from house to house. Towards the later part of his life, a son was born to him whom he educated in the prescribed manner and in due time gave him the sacred thread too.

When the boy was eleven years old the father died and the son duly performed the last rites and later on, the mother and son had to go without even of what the old Brahmin used to bring every day. The widow however took upon herself the task of dehusking paddy for other people for a small consideration. Even then the woman was in the habit of daily feeding a Brahmin first and then only taking her food.

The young boy who noticed it day after day, asked her one day: "Mother, why do you make it a point to feed a Brahmin every day even though we earn pretty little?"

The mother replied: "My child! I have heard from my elders praising *anna-dana* in very high terms. It is superior to all the sixteen *danas* mentioned in the *sastras*."

On hearing this the young boy asked his mother: "Mother! What are the benefits of *anna-dana*?"

She replied: "My son, I have only heard my elders praising *anna-dana*, but not all its virtues. In fact I have heard it said that no one but Lord Parameswara can explain all of the benefits of *anna-dana*."

On hearing this the boy replied: "Mother, if it is so great as all that I am very eager to know of it from Lord Parameswara Himself. Please permit me to proceed to the forest and seek by *tapas* to see Iswara and know from His own mouth the full benefits of *anna-dana*."

The mother, on hearing this, felt greatly pleased that her son went on the right road, and with all the love capable of a mother she blessed him with success in his valued mission.

With the single-mindedness of purpose characteristic of all great men, the boy proceeded in the direction of the forest which he traversed fast without once turning back, looking for a place which would be most suitable to him for the purpose he had undertaken. It was nearing dusk and he had not yet found one. At that time a hunter who was passing by noticed the boy. Fearing that if he proceeded further he would surely get lost in the wilderness when night would set in and that the place was full of wild beasts, the hunter ran after him and stopping him, addressed: "Sir, it is getting dark now and the distance before you is too great. This locality is dangerous, being infested by wild beasts. Please listen to me and stay with me this night. You can go your own way with the sunrise."

With reluctance the boy followed the hunter to his place. The hunter told his wife that he had brought a guest and that between them they should share their meagre food of corn flour with him and give him shelter at the tree-top where they had improvised a hut for spending the night.

As it happened, the hunter-woman was a ferocious one. Replied she: "I shall have nothing to do with your guest. I can neither spare from my food nor my sleeping berth on the tree. You can do what you like with him."

Disappointed by this reply, the hunter shared his food of corn flour with the young Brahmin guest, gave him the best part of his sleeping berth and himself clung to the end of his berth. The youngster slept safely. It so happened that at night the hunter turned in his sleep and slipped down from his perch and wild beasts which lay in wait below killed him instantaneously and ate him up.

The young boy woke up with the early rising sun and not seeing the host by his side, resumed his journey. But soon the hunter-woman sprang upon him and abused him for having been the cause of her husband's death.

The boy replied: "Mother! I had nothing to do with the death of your husband. I never wanted his hospitality. It was he who voluntarily took me on to your place, gave me a little of his food and gave me shelter. If he fell down to death, I am sorry for that. But to accuse me of his death is preposterous. Please make room, I must go."

Unmindful of the lament set up by the hunter-woman, the boy proceeded further in his journey.

After crossing the forest, the young Brahmin came across a small village. While passing along the village a Brahmin who owned large paddy fields saw this youngster going fast; stopping him he asked: "Who are you, son? Where do you come from and whither are you bound?"

The youngster stopped for a minute and replied: "Sir, I am going to find out from Lord Siva the virtues of *anna-dana*".

The Brahmin villager replied: "I am so pleased to hear it. I bless you with success in your quest; but can you do me a favour?"

Asked the boy: "What is that?"

The older Brahmin replied: "When you see Lord Siva, will you ask Him why the tanks which irrigate my fields break the bunds very often? Please be kind enough to return this way and let me know what the Lord has to say."

The boy agreed and proceeded further. Soon he came across a cripple who noticed the boy hurrying in the hot sun. Asked the cripple: "Young man, where are you proceeding in this hot sun and in such haste, may I know?"

The boy replied: "I am going to see Lord Siva to know from Him the virtues of *anna-dana.*"

On hearing this, the cripple requested the young man: "Sir, will you do me a favour by asking God why I have become a cripple and why should I suffer like this in the hot sun without food and nobody to care for me?"

The boy agreed and proceeded further. No sooner had he walked a few yards further than he saw a hooded serpent which, out of old age, was feeling extremely uncomfortable and unable to move out of its hideout and on account of its partial blindness.

Seeing however the young Brahmin going in such a haste, the old serpent was tempted to ask him: "Young man, where are you walking in such haste?"

"I am proceeding to meet Lord Siva for finding out the full benefits of *anna-dana.*"

The serpent replied: "I am so happy you are going to meet the Lord. May you succeed in your mission! But would you ask the Lord about my condition? I am partially blind and I have completely lost my appetite and at the same time experience great discomfort."

The young Brahmin assented and proceeded further. Soon after, he came across a mango-tree which was full of ripe, luscious fruits and yet neither men nor birds came near it, so that all the fruits went rot.

Finding out the young man's objective, this mango-tree also entrusted the youngster with the mission of finding out from the Lord the reason for its own strange existence.

Saddled with all these commissions, the youngster went further on and very soon came across a mountain which, on account of its charming surroundings, appeared to him as the most suitable place for his *tapas.*

For full one year the young Brahmin did austere penance devoted to Lord Siva in the blistering heat of summer and benumbing chill of the cold weather, without any respite whatsoever. The inevitable under the circumstances happened -- the Lord appeared, riding on his majestic *rishabh* and accompanied by Mother Parvati. On seeing the Divine couple, the young Brahmin jumped with joy and showered ecstatic prayer.

49. VIRTUES OF ANNA-DANA

PLEASED with the Brahmin's prayer, Lord Siva asked him: "Young man! Ask me of any boon you may need."

The Brahmin replied: "Lord! The moment I had *darsan* of Yourself and Mother, I have had all my needs fulfilled. I have only one desire and that is to know the virtues of *anna-dana.*"

The Lord replied: "Proceed from here to Virata-desa. The King of that country is childless. The King is doing all kinds of *dharmas* for getting a child. Take this sacred ash and *akshata.* Give them to the King. As a result of it a son will be born to him. Now, when the child is born, you arrange with the King to hold the child on a golden platter covered with tender plantain leaf before touching the earth. Ask the new-born babe your question. He will answer you!"

"I shall do so, my Lord. Now, on my way, a Brahmin asked me to find out from You why the tanks irrigating his fields burst times without number."

The young Brahmin also communicated the desires of the serpent, cripple and the mango tree.

The Lord replied: "Listen! The Brahmin has two over-aged daughters whom he has not given in marriage. The cirpple suffers because he is unwilling to impart the knowledge he had gained in his studies to others. The serpent is proud because of its *nagaratna.* The mango tree conceals seven jars of gold beneath it which are guarded by evil spirits. These are the causes."

The Brahmin asked: "What shall I tell them?"

The Lord replied: "Ask the Brahmin to give away the girls in marriage to suitable grooms. When he does so, his calamity will stop. Ask the cripple to impart his knowledge without any reserve to some suitable student. His trouble will be over. Ask the *naga* to present its *ratna* to some suitable person. It will stop experiencing any difficulty. Ask the mango tree to give away the jars of gold to the needy and it shall no longer suffer from its present disability."

Finally the Brahmin asked the Lord: "Lord! On my way here, a hunter gave me food and shelter, but just that night, he fell down and was eaten by a leopard. Why?"

"You will learn about him from the child whom you are going to interview!" replied the Lord and disappeared.

Happy that he had been able to see the Lord, the Brahmin was returning along the route he had traversed. When he came across the mango tree, he communicated the Lord's reply to its query. Happy that its fruits would be partaken by others, the tree gifted away all the seven jars of gold to the Brahmin himself. But the latter asked the tree to keep them till he returned and claimed them.

Proceeding further, he met the aged *naga* and reported the Lord's prescription. On hearing it, the *naga* became overjoyed and gave away its *naga-ratna* to the Brahmin himself for bringing the happy tiding. Taking it, he proceeded further and met the cripple to whom he reported what the Lord had said. Thereupon the cripple pitched upon the Brahmin himself to teach all his vast knowledge and wrote the *panchakshara mantra* on his tongue and bade him good-bye. He was immediately cured. Reaching the Brahmin's home, he reported the Lord's advice whereupon the latter showed and gave away both his daughters to the young Brahmin himself. For a few days he stayed in his father-in-law's place and taking his leave, went to Virata.

Meeting the King, the young Brahmin offered to cure the King of his childlessness. The King had experienced many people saying it and so he was sceptic. But when the Brahmin offered to take his own life in the event of failure, the King agreed. The Queen was brought. After she had taken the holy bath, the young Brahmin gave her the sacred ash and *akshata* given by Lord Siva. Soon the Queen was in the family way and the young Brahmin stayed on as a valued guest.

When the time for delivery neared the Brahmin expressed his desire to interview the child before it touched the earth. He also gave the antecedents for his strange request. The King was overjoyed. He sent for other Kings and nobles, and the new-born babe was brought to the august assembly in the manner indicated.

On seeing the child, the Brahmin fell on his knees and asked: "Pray tell me the virtues of *anna-dana!*".

The child smiled and in a distinct voice said: "I was the hunter in my last birth. I gave you a little corn flour and shelter for the night. As a result I am born as heir to an empire. If this is the result of that insignificant help, you can imagine the mighty benefits of full-scale and lifetime *anna-dana*. My wife, the huntress, refused to share her food and shelter with you. As a result, she is born as the fourth child of a sow in the hut of the head street-cleaner in this city. If you want, you can go and verify it. The piggling has white legs and a white spot on the forehead," and closed its mouth.

The King and all those assembled were amazed at the revelation. The child was taken back to the mother.

The assembled nobles became enormously interested in the young Brahmin who appeared to them to possess extraordinary powers. So they surrounded him and asked all about him. The Brahmin related them all. The King entertained the Brahmin youngster for some more days after which he sent him back to his place.

On the way, the young Brahmin collected the jars of gold from the tree, took his wives from the Brahmin landlord, and hurried to his mother at whose feet he placed his earnings and prostrated. His two wives also fell at her feet. The old woman wept in sheer joy.

Chaturya asked the Princess by his side: "You deserve such a husband as that Brahmin boy, don't you?"

When he said it, the early rays of the morning sun peered through the chinks in the door, when the Princess rose to go inside.

50. THE OILMAN'S DAUGHTER

WHEN the younger Princess came on the twelfth night, Chaturya, as usual, beguiled her with another story which was as follows:

King Gaurava ruled over Kalinga. One day his son went out on a hunt and on his way back, he saw a charming girl who was drying sesamum seeds before her house. She was an oil-monger's daughter. Attracted by her, the Prince alighted from his horse and asked her: "Young lady! Can you tell me of a flower which is smaller than the sesamum flower?"

This question stung her to the quick. She took it as an affront to her father who was an oil-monger. Not to be out-done, she asked the Prince: "You are born in flower, bred in flower and rule the flower of an empire. Could you tell me of a two-petalled flower?"

The effect of this repartee was not lost on the Prince too who, although gave the correct answer, (the eye) yet vowed to her: "If I am the Prince of Kalinga, I shall not leave you unpunished for your impertinence. Listen—I shall do so by marrying you, but right from that moment, making you a life-prisoner by consigning you to solitary confinement!"

The girl was not to be out-done. She gave a counter-challenge: "If you really mean what you say, I shall bear a son by you and make him flog you with a whip for your impertinence!"

Choking with rage, the Prince trotted home on his charger and fell flat on his bed. He failed to turn up for his dinner. When his solicitous father came to him, the Prince said: "Father! I have made a vow and I want to fulfil it."

"O, that is simple. Why should you forego your meal?"

"No, not so simple, I presume, father! I want to marry the daughter of the oil-monger residing in yonder street."

"What!" exclaimed the Maharaja. "I have never known or heard a predecessor of mine marrying a commoner. Please, forget it."

"If that is your decision, father, I shall relinquish my title to this kingdom and become a commoner. May be, by cutting all my links with my parents I may be able to marry the woman," replied the Prince.

Realizing that his son was dead-fixed on the girl, the King gave in. Soon royal emissaries sought out the oil-monger who had already been briefed by his daughter. He expressed himself as deeply beholden to the king for the honour being done to him. In short, he readily agreed and the day was fixed for the marriage. The City was gaily decorated and invitations were sent to all neighbouring Kings. The marriage took place amidst great pomp and not a word of the challenge had leaked.

Soon after the distinguished guests had departed the Prince was as good as his word; for, he took his bride straight to the palace annexe, which had been filled with provisions, for her solitary confinement. Placing a woman servant at the disposal of his bride, the Prince sealed the door of the palace from outside, happy that he was able to fulfil the first vow of his life.

According to the briefing of his daughter, the oilmonger, engaged some capable engineers and ordered at enormous cost, the construction of a secret underground tunnel connecting his house and the palace where his daughter was confined. For months together the excavation work went on, unknown to anybody else. Soon contact was established and the oilmonger's daughter's joy knew no bounds when she found she could thenceforward walk out of and return to the place of confinement as and when she desired. Instructing her servant not to call for her unless asked, the oilman's daughter proceeded to her home the next day *via* the tunnel. Father and daughter wept for joy at their first meeting after her marriage.

Said the daughter: "Father! The next item of my agenda is this.. Please get hold of a street-juggler and engage him to instruct me in his arts during fixed hours when I shall be here."

Accordingly the oilman got hold of an ace street-juggler and engaged him to instruct his daughter in all the tricks of his trade and also in the performance of tantalising acrobatics. Very soon, the oilman's daughter became an expert performer.

Under instruction from her, the instructor got an appointment with the King for the exhibition of his tricks. He collected the best team from among his pupils, the star-performer, of course, being the oilman's daughter. On the appointed day a huge crowd had collected before the palace to witness the much advertised performances. Members of the royal family sat together in the balcony. The oilman's daughter had dressed herself so rakishly and distinguished herself by her feats so well that she easily stole the heart of the Prince who did not in the least recognise in her his own segregated wife. As a mark of his appreciation of her, the Prince, at the end of the show, presented the oilman's daughter with his pearl necklace and as he did so, he did not leave his intention undisclosed.

The oilman's daughter who returned home along with the party called the leader aside and said: "Old man! The Prince will soon call on you. He will ask you about me. Tell him I am your daughter. He will want to have my company. At first try to put him off. Finally yield to him for the price of a thousand gold coins and arrange the meeting at the summer-house in the outskirts of the city at nightfall." The old man agreed.

No sooner had he turned his back on her, than he heard the prancing hooves of the royal horse at his door. When he opened it, he was agreeably surprised to be confronted by the Prince who took him aside.

Things happened just in the way as had been indicated by the oilman's daughter. The meeting was arranged and on the following night, the oilman's daughter, unrecognised by the Prince, lived with her own husband, each with a purpose. When the Prince departed in the early morning from the summer-house, little did he suspect that he would be made to eat his words.

Happy that the second act of her drama had successfully concluded, the oilman's daughter went back to her home and from there through the tunnel to her confinement. At the close of ten months from that date, she gave birth to a glorious son who grew up to be an *enfant terrible* at her father's place.

When he was about six years old, one of his mates abused him as a fatherless child whereupon the youngster asked his grandfather about it all. He in turn took him *via* the tunnel to his mother. That was the day the oilman's daughter had been eagerly awaiting. She embraced the child and told him who his father was and what he owed to her.

"Leave it to me, mother. I shall see you soon after fulfilling your vow," said he and returned in the company of his grandfather.

Learning all about his mother made the boy seek the street-performer under whom he too underwent a course of education. By that time he had grown into a youth with a powerful frame of body and mind. Later on taking leave of his grand-parents, he sought board in a neighbouring village in the home of an old woman and in exchange looked after her buffaloes.

While in her employ, the boy carried out a series of successful raids on the royal palace and stole the personal effects of the Prince too. The King alerted the Police but the Police Chief himself was made a scapegoat of by the clever boy. This infuriated the Prince so much that he himself set out to catch the thief or thieves who had been eluding the police force with such cleverness.

The youngster who came to know of it decided to seize the opportunity and dressing himself as a small trader and taking with him all the paraphernalia of his vocation, pitched his tent at a forlorn place a few miles away from city limits. It was dusk and he could hear the movement of a hundred horses and the rattling of swords. He became alert.

On seeing the lone light flickering from the boy's tent, the equestrian party halted before him. It was the royal troupe with the Prince at the head. The youngster was struck by the remarkable resemblance of himself to the Prince and decided to make capital out of it.

Asked the Prince of him: "Hey! Why do you stay here at this time?"

"Hi hi..." started the youthful trader and said: "I have a special kind of clients at night here."

"What do you mean?" asked the Prince.

"To tell you the truth, the lightfingered fraternity who frequent these parts are my valued customers," replied the youth.

The effect of this revelation was miraculous, for the Prince dismounted and taking the youth aside asked him "Young man! I am the Prince of this kingdom. I am out to catch the thieves who have lately been on the rampage. If you help me to catch them, I shall reward you suitably!"

The youth replied: "I am much obliged to you sir, and I feel it my duty to help the State. But the way of doing it is different. For that, you have to ask your followers to remove a mile away from here. You and I alone can stay here. When the "guests" arrive I shall quietly hand them over to you!" and laughed.

The Prince agreed and ordered his followers to stay back.

After some time, the youth asked the Prince: "Sir, it is time that they start coming. Now I would advise you to remove your regal attire and, putting on common ones, enter this gunny bag. When my clients arrive, I can easily open this bag in the way of opening a commodity."

It appeared reasonable and soon the Prince prepared himself to enter the gunny bag *sans* his royal appurtenances.

Once he was in, the youth fastened the gag on the Prince's mouth and bundled him up in the bag with strong ropes. Next, he put on the royal robes himself, mounted the Prince's horse and whistled, when all the royal followers who had been staying back rushed to him. The youth's resemblance to the Prince has already been alluded to. In consequence of it, the infantry men literally took him for the Prince. The fake-Prince called out to them: "Look! Here, inside the gunny is the arch criminal who has been marauding. Carry him to the palace," and as he said so, he flogged the Prince who was bound hand and foot inside the gunny.

Separating himself from the party, the fake-Prince went to where he had hidden his loot and carrying them all in another bag, returned to the King's presence. In the meantime a huge crowd had collected to see the thief caught red-handed by the Prince.

The fake-Prince deposited all the stolen articles before the King stating that they had been recovered from the thief who lay before them in the gunny bag. The King was overjoyed and embraced the fake-Prince thinking it was his own son. So did all the ministers and other officials believe.

When at the bidding of the King the gunny was opened and the gag removed from the prisoner, the King thundered at his own son: "Why, you thief, did you enter my city? Where do you come from?"

The thoughts passing through the Prince's mind at that time can only be imagined. Nevertheless, he overcame the humiliation and shouted passionately: "No, I am not the thief. I am your son. The man who stands before you and whom you think to be your son is the real thief!"

The King looked from one man to the other and felt perplexed. To further clarify things, he made the prisoner wear the royal robes, when the resemblance between the two became remarkable.

At last the old King called the youth aside and asked him in loving words, "Who are you? Tell me."

The youth replied: "I don't know. Ask your son to bring before you his wife who has been kept in isolation at yonder palace annexe. She will tell you all about me."

The old King was astounded and gave immediate orders to bring the oilman's daughter before him. She was brought. Called upon to explain the youth's statement, she fell at the feet of the old King and related *in extenso* all that she had done to fulfil her vow and ended by declaring that the youth standing before him was his own grandson by her.

Called upon by the King to prove her statement, she produced the pearl necklace and other ornaments presented by the Prince to her when they were alone on a night at the summerhouse which made it clear beyond doubt that the youngster was no other than the Prince's own son.

The youngster rounded up the story by recounting what all he did to fulfil his mother's vow.

It was impossible to say who was happier. Needless to mention that the Prince got reconciled to the oilmonger's daughter and his son with whom he lived long after.

Chaturya ended: "Princess! You need a husband of the calibre of the Prince-cub, don't you?"

As he said this, it was nearing day-break and so the Princess left him.

51. WEDDING BELLS

On the morning of the thirteenth day when Chaturya went down for his morning routine, the Princesses together served him with breakfast and asked him later: "Lord! You have all these nights been putting us off by telling us stories. While they were entertaining, your action has been exasperating to us. Again, at the time of marrying us, you made the *mangal-sutras* to be tied by a *sumangali* and not by you. Putting these two together, we are led to suspect your intentions in regard to us. Please explain, we beg of you!"

Chaturya who had been waiting for this day replied: "My dears! I have been telling you these stories only to impress upon you the fact which you have discovered today. Listen to me carefully. I am the son of the Minister of Mahendrapuri. The Prince of the Kingdom is my bosom friend." And he related how his friend the Prince was maligned by his *guru's* daughter, how the Prince was ordered to be beheaded, how together they escaped, how in a neighbouring country while looking at the paintings on the walls of a temple the Prince became infatuated with them and how he set about and discovered them in their persons for the purpose of marrying them to his friend.

He concluded: "You see now my real intention. You may therefore ask your father's permission to follow me to where my friend languishes. I shall take both of you before him. Whomsoever he touches first will become his bride and the other...."

"Becomes your bride!" completed the Princesses and all three laughed in exultation.

The King sent his two matchless daughters along with Chaturya, adding at the same time proper retinue and gifts.

For days together the party travelled. On the way Chaturya met the painter who did the tell-tale portraits and gave him the clue to the girls. At last he reached the city where his friend, the Prince still awaited him. Chaturya took the girls to the old woman's boarding house where he learned all about the well-being of his friend. Next he saw the King of the place and after briefing him properly took the two Princesses to the temple where the Prince lay in wait before the portrait.

Escorting the two girls Chaturya stood before his friend and said: "My friend, I have brought here before you the two girls who appear in the portrait."

The Prince stood up in surprise and saw the very two girls standing before him in person. In his eagerness, the Prince held the hands of the elder Princess while the younger Princess automatically slid behind Chaturya and held his hand.

The party then drove to the old woman's house where they celebrated the occasion by holding a miniature feast. Meals over, Chaturya related *in extenso* the trials and tribulations he had to undergo and how at last success crowned his efforts.

On hearing them all the Prince replied: "Chaturya! You saved my life first from the gallows. Now by saving my life for the second time from the fire of love which would certainly have consumed it, you have put me under a great debt. By your acts, you are fit to be worshipped by me as my own father!"

Chaturya replied: "Prince and master! I have heard it said that that minister alone who saves his king from difficulties becomes a Bhatti. I am only trying to walk in the footsteps of the illustrious fore-runner!"

After bidding good-bye to the city, the party proceeded in the direction of Mahendrapuri. On the way they camped in a grove. At night, Chaturya got an uneasy feeling and so sat up. To his surprise he heard the ominous chirp of a pair of owls which conversed to this effect: "The Prince who sleeps under this tree will lose his life from the falling of this bough. If he survives it, he will be washed away in the floods further along. If he survives that too, he is sure to lose his life at the hands of his former wife! If anyone publicises this talk of ours, his head will break into smithereens!"

Chaturya was not too late to remove the cot of the sleeping Prince instantly, for it fell the next moment. At the next stage, while the party was asleep, the river by the side rose in spate but Chaturya was alert and succeeded in removing the sleeping Prince to safety.

Reaching Mahendrapuri he left the party outside at a distance. The Prince, followed by Chaturya entered the palace and prostrated before the King and Queen. Although the latter were happy to receive them, they had yet not got over their revulsion over their son in connection with his alleged misbehaviour towards his *guru's* daughter.

On reaching his apartment, the Prince said: "Chaturya! You have been guarding me like an angel all these days. Now that we have reached home, won't you take rest?"

Looking sad, Chaturya replied: "Prince! Do not ask me any questions. Permit me to hide beneath your cot tonight in your bedroom even when your (first) wife is in." The Prince unquestioningly permitted him to do so.

When night set in, the Prince moved into his bedroom and checked up that Chaturya was there in the assigned place. As time wore the Prince, being exhausted; fell fast asleep. When the Prince's wife came in, she found her husband soundly asleep. She made a noise which failed to arouse him. Turning disdainfully from him she went out of the room and veiling herself heavily, walked in the direction of a dilapidated *mutt* along a secret route. Chaturya came out of his hiding and shadowed her in the dark.

The Prince's wife on reaching the ruined place called on a lame beggar before whom she placed the sweet things she had brought. The cripple took her to task for being late that night. She explained that her husband had returned. The cripple feigned surprise and asked: "You never told me you were married. I detest women who betray their husbands!"

The Princess cried and agreed finally to become his own by killing her husband. Taking the rapier supplied by him she returned to the bedroom and before Chaturya could overpower her, she had slain her husband. She took advantage of the compromising situation and raised a hue and cry that Chaturya had murdered the Prince. The King, Queen and other officials rushed to the scene. Questioned by the King, Chaturya replied: "Did I not have enough of opportunities to do this when I was alone with the Prince all these months?"

The King took the hint and stopping further proceedings arranged for the proper disposal of his son's body.

Chaturya, however, had the presence of mind to forestall it by receiving the body and by embalming it and keeping it in safe custody.

In the meantime Chaturya's wife (first) had vowed to offer her right hand as *bali* to Kalimata if her husband returned safely. Having seen her husband return, she went at night to Kalimata's temple and after bathing, worshipped the deity in the prescribed manner at the close of which she raised the sword to cut her hand when Kalimata appeared before her and said: "My daughter, stop! I am satisfied with your devotion. Ask me of any boon you require."

Chaturya's wife bowed before the Mother Goddess and asked: "Mother! This right hand of mine, I decided to give you. May the dying creeper, touched by it, grow, prosper, flower and bear fruits in abundance!"

"So be it" said Kalimata and disappeared.

On her way, she touched a dead tree which immediately sprouted to life with blossoms and fruits. She felt happy.

Chaturya who had been witness to this miracle was touched by the devotion of his wife and on return home slept like a top, happy that he got the formula to raise his dead friend.

Early in the morning Chaturya's wife having duly bathed, worshipped Mother Kali and entered her husband's chamber with breakfast. After he had partaken of it, she asked her husband: "Lord! You had been away for such a long time. May I know what my Lord has brought for me?"

"O Yes, my dear, look! Open that box and take out what is there," replied he.

Chaturya's wife accordingly opened the huge box and put her hand inside, but immediately took it out in fright and cried: "Lord! What is inside? I thought it was the hand of some man!"

While Chaturya laughed, the box opened and the live form of the Prince emerged out of the box as though disturbed in a sleep.

Readers may be aware that in virtue of Kalimata's boon, Chaturya's wife had an arm which could revive dead things by its touch. So, when it touched the dead Prince, he became alive. Chaturya jumped in sheer joy and embraced his friend.

After explaining to him all that had happened to him since he returned, Chaturya took his friend to the King and Queen who on seeing their dead son before them could not believe their own eyes. Chaturya soon related to them the circumstances of his coming back to life and incidentally revealed the perfidy of his daughter-in-law. At this revelation, his head broke into smithereens as foretold by the owls. But as briefed earlier Chaturya's wife put the pieces together whereon, he regained life. The cripple was caught and on his evidence, the King's daughter-in-law was executed.

Chaturya also explained to the King how the *guru's* daughter had maliciously implicated his son and related their exploits thereafter till they returned home. Commending the cripple for leniency, Chaturya asked his wife to touch him, whereupon he became perfect and Chaturya employed him in his service.

The King on the advice of Chaturya went and received the two Princesses whom Chaturya had won from the other country and brought them to the palace. On an auspicious day, the elder Princess was married to the Prince and the younger to Chaturya.

In course of time, the old King handed over his kingdom to his son and retired to the forest along with his queen. He also made Chaturya the new Prime Minister of his country. With the help of Chaturya, the new King ruled over the country for long.

INDIAN COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL RELATIONS
NEW DELHI

A LIST OF AVAILABLE BHAVAN'S "BOOK UNIVERSITY" TITLES

Elegant in format and get-up and securely bound, these delightful, instructive and inspiring books in *English* are all priced at only Rs. 2.00 *per volume* (Sh. 3/6; $ 0.90; Rs. 2.25 outside India), except where otherwise stated.

SERIAL NOS.

1. MAHABHARATA *by* C. Rajagopalachari (*6th edition*)
   MAHABHARATA (*Special library edition*): Rs. 7.50
2. THE ART OF LIFE IN THE BHAGAVAD GITA *by* H. V. Divatia (*4th edition*)
3. SPARKS FROM THE ANVIL *by* K. M. Munshi (*2nd edition*)
4. GANDHI'S VIEW OF LIFE *by* Chandrashanker Shukla (*4th edition*)
5. ASPIRATIONS FROM A FRESH WORLD *by* Shakuntala Rao Shastri (*2nd edition*)
7. THINGS OF BEAUTY *by* V. N. Bhushan (*2nd edition*)
8. SOMNATH: *The Shrine Eternal*: (Special de luxe edition): Rs. 7.50
10. WOMEN IN THE VEDIC AGE *by* Shakuntala Rao Shastri (*3rd edition*)
11. LIFE OF MAHATMA GANDHI: Vol. I: *by* Louis Fischer (*3rd edition*)
12. LIFE OF MAHATMA GANDHI: Vol. II: *by* Louis Fischer (*3rd edition*)
13. WOMEN IN THE SACRED LAWS *by* Shakuntala Rao Shastri (*2nd edition*)
14. OUR GREATEST NEED *by* K. M. Munshi
15. MAHAYOGI (*Life*, *Sadhana* and *Teachings* of Sri Aurobindo) *by* R. R. Diwakar (*3rd edition*)
    MAHAYOGI (*Marathi edition*): Rs. 2.25
    MAHAYOGI (*Bengali edition*): Rs. 2.00
18. BADRINATH KI AUR *by* K. M. Munshi (*in Hindi*): Re. 0.50 nP.
19. LIVING BIOGRAPHIES OF GREAT PHILOSOPHERS *by* Thomas & Thomas (*2nd edition*)
21. FUNDAMENTALS OF INDIAN ART *by* Surendranath Dasgupta (*2nd edition*)

22. Janu's Death and Other Kulapati's Letters *by* K. M. Munshi

23. Fundamental Unity of India *by* Radha Kumud Mookerji (*2nd edition*)

24. Annie Besant *by* Sri Prakasa

25. The Call of the Vedas *by* A. C. Bose (*2nd edition*)

26. Glory that was Gurjaradesa: Vol. I: *by* K. M. Munshi

27. Glory that was Gurjaradesa: Vol II: *by* K. M. Munshi
Glory that was Gurjaradesa (*Special de luxe edition*, complete in one volume): Rs. 15.00

28. Geographical Factors in Indian History *by* K. M. Panikkar (*2nd edition*)

29. Kumbha: *India's Ageless Festival*: *by* Dilip Kumar Roy and Indira Devi

30. City of Paradise & Other Kulapati's Letters *by* K. M. Munshi

31. On a Forbidden Flight *by* Satyanarayan Sinha

32. Livng Biographies of Religious Leaders *by* Thomas & Thomas (*2nd edition*)

33. Bhagavad Gita and Modern Life (*Special library edition*): Rs. 5.00
Bhagavad Gita aur Aadhunik Jeevan *by* K. M. Munshi (*in Hindi*): Rs. 2.25

34. Indian Inheritance: Vol. I: *by* Eminent Contributors (*3rd edition*)

35. Indian Inheritance: Vol. II: *by* Eminent Contributors (*3rd edition*)

40. Indian Inheritance: Vol. III: *by* Eminent Contributors (*2nd edition*)

36. Studies in Epics and Puranas of India *by* A. D. Pusalker (*2nd edition*)

37. Hinduism through the Ages *by* D. S. Sarma (*3rd edition*)

38. Flight to Soviet Land *by* Satyanarayan Sinha

39. Wolf Boy & Other Kulapati's Letters *by* K. M. Munshi

42. Minstrels of God: Vol. I: *by* Bankey Behari

43. Minstrels of God: Vol. II: *by* Bankey Behari

44. Ramayana *by* C. Rajagopalachari (*4th edition*)
Ramayana (*Special library edition*): Rs. 7.50

45. IMMORTAL INDIA: Vol. I: *by* J. H. Dave (*2nd edition*)
66. IMMORTAL INDIA: Vol. II: *by* J. H. Dave
77. IMMORTAL INDIA: Vol. III: *by* J. H. Dave
85. IMMORTAL INDIA: Vol. IV: *by* J. H. Dave
46. HINDU CIVILIZATION: Vol. I: *by* Radha Kumud Mookerji
47. HINDU CIVILIZATION: Vol. II: *by* Radha Kumud Mookerji
48. INTRODUCTION TO VEDANTA *by* P. Nagaraja Rao (*2nd edition*)
51. FALL OF MEVAR *by* Dwijendralal Roy
52. SANKARA'S TEACHINGS IN HIS OWN WORDS *by* Swami Atmananda (*2nd edition*)
53. SWAN LOVE & OTHER KULAPATI'S LETTERS *by* K. M. Munshi
54. RECONSTRUCTION OF HUMANITY *by* Pitirim A. Sorokin (*2nd edition*)
56. AKBAR: Vol. I: *by* J. M. Shelat
57. AKBAR: Vol. II: *by* J. M. Shelat
59. BHAKTIYOGA *by* Aswini Kumar Datta
60. INDIAN TRAVEL DIARY OF A PHILOSOPHER *by* Count Keyserling
61. BHAGAWAN PARASHURAMA: Vol. I: *by* K. M. Munshi
62. BHAGAWAN PARASHURAMA: Vol. II: *by* K. M. Munshi
63. DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM *by* Asoka Mehta
64. NEO-UPANISHADIC PHILOSOPHY *by* G. V. Gajendragadkar
65. NETAJI IN GERMANY: *A Little-Known Chapter*: *by* N. G. Ganpuley
67. BHAGAWAN BUDDHA *by* R. R. Diwakar
BHAGAWAN BUDDHA (*Special library edition*): Rs. 4.00
68. STORIES OF VIKRAMADITYA (Simhasana Dwatrimsika)
69. STORIES OF VIKRAMADITYA (Vetala Panchavimsati)
70. THE CULTURE OF INDIA: *As Envisaged by Sri Aurobindo*: *by* C. C. Dutt
71. HINDU AMERICA? *by* Chaman Lal
72. PATHWAY TO GOD IN KANNADA LITERATURE *by* R. D. Ranade
PATHWAY TO GOD IN KANNADA LITERATURE (*Special library edition*): Rs. 6.00
73. POWER AND MORALITY *by* Pitirim A. Sorokin & Walter A. Lunden

74. An Anthology of Modern Indian Eloquence *by* R. K. Prabhu
75. Upanishads in Story and Dialogue *by* R. R. Diwakar
76. Yogic Powers and God Realization *by* V. M. Bhat
78. The World We Saw *by* K. M. Munshi
79. Madhva's Teachings in His Own Words *by* B. N. K. Sharma
80. The Upanishads: *An Anthology*: *by* D. S. Sarma
81. Bhakta Mira *by* Bankey Behari
82. Sane Sex Order by Pitirim A. Sorokin
83. Swami Shraddhanand *by* M. R. Jambunathan
84. Replies to the Reader *by* K. M. Munshi
86. Ten Saints of India *by* T. M. P. Mahadevan
87. Glimpses of Ancient India *by* Radha Kumud Mookerji
88. Living Biographies of Great Scientists *by* Thomas & Thomas
89. Pathway to God in Marathi Literature *by* R. D. Ranade
90. Swami Rama Tirtha *by* S. R. Sharma
91. In Quest of God *by* Swami Ramdas
92. Lord Gauranga *by* Shishir Kumar Ghose
93. Stories as told by Swami Ramdas
94. Frank Buchman's Secret *by* Peter Howard
95. Russia, America and the World *by* Louis Fischer
96. Krishna-A Study in the Theory of Avataras *by* Bhagavan Das
97. Temples and Legends of Maharashtra *by* M. S. Mate
98. Temples and Legends of Andhra Pradesh *by* N. Ramesan
99. Studies in Bengali Poetry *by* Humayun Kabir
100. Sufis, Mystics and Yogis of India *by* Bankey Behari
101. Facets of Indian Culture *by* R. Srinivasan

G 1 Towards Lasting Peace *by* Mahatma Gandhi
G 2 Socialism of My Conception *by* Mahatma Gandhi

Books listed above are all priced at Rs. 2.00 each except where otherwise stated

BHARATIYA VIDYA BHAVAN
Chowpatty, BOMBAY 7 (India)

remember ... **BHAVAN'S BOOKS** *for better reading!*